

Firestorm

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/255513) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/255513>.

Rating:

[Explicit](#)

Archive Warnings:

[Graphic Depictions Of Violence](#), [Major Character Death](#)

Category:

[F/M](#)

Fandom:

[Katekyou Hitman Reborn!](#)

Relationship:

[Xanxus/Squalo](#)

Characters:

[Xanxus](#), [Superbia Squalo](#), [Federico Vongola](#), [Enrico Vongola](#), [Timoteo Vongola](#), [Sawada Iemitsu](#), [Yamamoto Tsuyoshi](#), [Lal Mirch](#), [Levi A Than](#), [Lussuria](#), [Mammon \(Reborn\)](#)

Additional Tags:

[Original Characters - Freeform](#), [Alternate Universe - Gender Changes](#), [Smut](#), [Violence](#)

Language:

[English](#)

Series:

Part 19 of [Choice](#)

Stats:

Published: 2011-09-20 Words: 50,514 Chapters: 7/7

Firestorm

by [Lys ap Adin \(lysapadin\)](#)

Summary

They had been sleeping up at the main house off and on, leaving the sheets of Xanxus' bed a mess and staring her family down over breakfast afterwards, for a good six months before anyone said anything about it.

Notes

Adult for smut and explicit violence. Genderswitch, drama, angst, original characters, and mafia politics; 50558 words.

Chapter 1

Xanxus' family was, not to put too fine a point on it, kind of screwed up. There were parts of it that weren't too bad, Squalo supposed—Federico was clearly the best of the lot, and Massimo's brats were too young to be more than mildly annoying, which was the function of small children anyway—but the rest of them didn't impress him all that much. The Ninth might have been a damn fine mafia boss, but he didn't have the first clue how to relate to his daughter and it showed in the way he treated her. (For some reason, he seemed to be under the impression that eventually she would emerge from the cocoon of her tomboyish ways and turn out to be a beautiful, feminine butterfly. At least, that was all Squalo could assume, given the way the Ninth kept bringing the girly stuff up and ignoring the way it made Xanxus grind her teeth.) Massimo wasn't completely horrible; he was mostly preoccupied with his pack of kneebiters and his lemon groves and kept assuming that Xanxus and Squalo were engaged or planning to be, which was a delusion best left ignored.

But Enrico... Squalo freely admitted to himself and to Xanxus that he didn't like Enrico, who clearly felt that Xanxus ought to marry well in order to cement a good alliance for the Vongola, or, failing that, should have at least settled her affections on a more appropriate object than a no-name punk whose only saving grace was being damn good with a sword.

As far as Squalo was concerned, Enrico Vongola was a waste of space and oxygen.

After about a month of attending family dinners with Xanxus, Squalo couldn't keep his mouth shut any longer. "Boss," he said, once they were home again, safely within the walls of her rooms where the wrong ears weren't going to hear him. "You think I can get away with killing Enrico?"

He was sitting cross-legged on the bed, watching her take the dangle of beads and feathers from her hair; he remembered that after, watching her fingers still in her hair while she thought it over. Then she snorted and resumed what she was undoing, unpinning the dangle. "You shouldn't tempt me like that."

"Why not? No one would actually miss him." In Squalo's opinion, Enrico clearly hadn't ever managed to get over the fact that he was the oldest but *not* the one who would be Tenth. He made up for it by

trying to impose his will on anyone who'd stand still long enough to let him do it: his drab little wife, for one, and Xanxus, for another, which was what had inspired the question about killing him in the first place. "He's clearly too stupid to live."

"Not going to argue with that." Xanxus set the dangle down on her dresser. Squalo could see the reflection of her face in the mirror; her expression was distant. Was she thinking about this evening's debacle, when Enrico had implied that she ought to think about retiring from the Varia and, in his words, settling down? Or was she thinking about some other example of his stupidity? They had a whole range of them to choose from, after all.

She shook her head after a moment. "The old man wouldn't like it much." She ran her fingers through her hair and turned away from the mirror. "So you'd better not."

"Pity," Squalo said, but then Xanxus dropped her fingers to the hem of her camisole and peeled it off, which gave him something much better to think about than Enrico fucking Vongola. "God, Boss..."

She smiled as she tossed the camisole aside and prowled over to the bed to claim his mouth; they both forgot about Enrico at that point.

Squalo always did wonder what would have happened, after, if they hadn't.

They had been sleeping up at the main house off and on, leaving the sheets of Xanxus' bed a mess and staring her family down over breakfast afterwards, for a good six months before anyone said anything about it. (Well, *said*: they'd all done plenty of *looking*. Federico pretty much beamed at them any time they caught his eye and the Ninth looked rueful but pleased and Enrico tended to look like he'd been sucking on a lemon; Massimo didn't live at the main house so who knew what he would have looked like or if he'd even have noticed.)

It happened like this: Squalo hadn't really been paying attention to the conversation over the remains of breakfast; he'd been lingering over the last of his coffee instead and daydreaming a little over the pleasant ache in his thighs and ass from the night before, when Xanxus had bent him over a stack of pillows and fucked him silly. When he realized that Xanxus had gone stiff in her chair next to him, he cursed himself for having let his guard down that much and for having assumed that they were in friendly territory just because they

were having breakfast with her family. He should have known better than that.

He hadn't been paying enough attention to know what Enrico had said first, or what Xanxus had growled at him in return, but the man's round face flushed as Squalo tuned back in, and he raised his voice. "No, I will *not* shut up. This has been going on for quite long enough and if no one else is going to say it, I will!" He cut his hand through the air; his wife leaned away from it while the Ninth and Federico both frowned. "Considering your position in this Family, it is past time you grew up and began acting like a proper daughter of the Vongola should. It's the least you could do."

Xanxus was drawn tight as a bowstring, practically vibrating in her chair, and her lips were pressed together so tightly that they'd gone white.

Federico coughed. "Like a proper daughter of the Vongola should?" he repeated, sounding like he was trying not to laugh. "God, Enrico, have you been reading trashy novels again?"

The look his brother gave him was full of venom. "Laugh all you want, but this isn't a joking matter. Her behavior is a disgrace to the Vongola name." He swept his hand through the air again. "Bad enough that we've let her run around calling herself the head of the Varia for these past few years, but we're going to lose any hope of establishing a solid connection with the Miccoli if we don't get her under control soon."

Someone was growling; maybe it was Xanxus or maybe it was him, or hell, maybe it was the both of them. Squalo didn't much care, too enraged on behalf of the Varia and its pride and *Xanxus'* pride, and what did Enrico *mean*, a solid connection to the Miccoli?

Federico was still smiling, but all the laughter had gone out of his voice when he said, "There's more to life than connections to the Miccoli, you know. I thought we'd established that."

"We've established that you're an idiot," Enrico retorted, slicing his hand through the air yet again. "That boy is the only one they've got. We could be adding all their territory to the Vongola's holdings inside a generation and triple our income and power base, if only you'd just get your head out of your ass and—"

Federico interrupted him, voice sharp. "And treat my sister like a bargaining chip? Disregard her personal preferences in the matter?"

He lifted his eyebrows. "Speak over her head like she was a child who doesn't know what we're talking about? Sis, how about it—you willing to marry Angelo Miccoli? Gotta admit, it'd be good for business if you would."

"Fuck, no." Xanxus' voice was harsh; she nearly vibrated in her chair. "I'll kill anyone who wants to try and make me, too." There was Flame in her voice, the roar of an inferno bearing out how seriously she meant that.

"There you go, Enrico." Federico leaned back in his seat. "It's a moot point. Even if I *were* the Tenth—which I'm not, yet, by the way—" The Ninth inclined his head, mouth quirked beneath his mustache, as if amused by the acknowledgment that he was still the head of the Vongola. "—she says she won't do it. And I wouldn't care to be the kind of boss who would try to compel her." He lifted his coffee cup to his mouth and paused to give Enrico a look full of gentle curiosity. "Are you saying you would be?"

The part of Squalo that was able to stand aside and observe no matter how heated the fight saw how that struck home. Enrico's face flushed darker before he rallied. "That's not the point, anyway," he blustered. "She shouldn't be running around like she is, because it's shaming us all. God knows she ought to at least *pretend* that she's better than that."

Squalo's vision narrowed to one point, the man sitting across the table, and was overlaid with a haze of red. A hand there, on the back of the heavy chair. A boot here, between the plates and the centerpiece. A flickering twist of his wrist to drop the blade down out of the straps that held it concealed in his sleeve. Momentum enough that his target's expression had only just begun to change before Squalo slammed into him, bearing him and his chair over backwards. Air on his teeth as he brought the sword around for what would be a quick, clean slash across the unprotected flesh of his target's throat—

"Squalo!"

Squalo stopped, the edge of his blade just kissing Enrico's throat as every muscle in his body froze at Xanxus' shout. Beneath him, Enrico had gone grey; sweat broke out across his skin as he stared up at Squalo, which was right and good. Red still hazed his vision and someone was snarling—no, that was him. Well, and why not? Enrico had all but called Xanxus a—

"Stand down, Squalo." Xanxus' voice was hard and did not brook any arguments.

It took every bit of Squalo's self-control to obey her—the first time he'd ever had difficulty doing so. He unlocked his muscles slowly, pulling the blade away from Enrico's throat with the greatest reluctance. "Boss," he said, hoarse, eyes never leaving Enrico's as the man raised a hand to touch his own throat, fingering it like he wasn't sure it was still there. "Boss, *please*—"

"Don't be an idiot." Xanxus' voice was taut; that percolated through Squalo's rage as his focus began to open up again, bringing with it the awareness that there were more people in the room than there had been, men with guns, most of which were pointing his way. "Stand the fuck *down*."

"Yes, Boss." Squalo sucked in a breath through his teeth and stood, raising his hands as he did and twisting his wrist so that his sword dropped back into its sheath. He stepped away from Enrico.

There was a moment of silence—everyone processing what had just happened—before everyone started talking all at once, the bodyguards barking questions and Enrico pushing himself up off the floor and saying, "He tried to kill me!" and Federico saying, "What did you *think* he was trying to do, ask you to dance?" and the growling sound Xanxus made when a pair of the bodyguards came over to cover Squalo. He stayed perfectly still, letting them do it, because he *had* sort of promised that he wasn't going to let anyone else shoot him.

The Ninth had to raise his voice to cut through all the hubbub. "Everyone, please. Calm down." And he *was* still the Ninth, because everyone did shut up, though God only knew how long Enrico was going to manage to stay silent. He was glaring at Squalo, hatred twisting his mouth.

Hadn't made any friends there, had he? Squalo showed Enrico his teeth and had the satisfaction of seeing the man take a step back.

"I believe we're just fine here," the Ninth told the bodyguards, his tone brisk. "We had an exciting moment, but no harm done. You may go." He made it sound like it hadn't been anything more than a scuffle over who would get the last cinnamon roll, not—anything else. The man who must have been the most senior of the bodyguards started to open his mouth, the look of disbelief writ clear on his face, but the Ninth simply repeated himself, tone firm. "You may go. Now."

They went, though not a one of them looked happy about it. Squalo lowered his hands after they had closed the door after themselves, feeling the adrenaline beginning to ebb from his system.

"He tried to kill me!" Enrico said, apparently no longer able to contain himself. He leveled a shaking finger at Squalo. "I'll have your head for this."

Squalo grinned at him. "Come and get it," he said. "Please."

Enrico looked less certain of himself. Then Xanxus said, tone so cold that the words practically had icicles hanging off them, "If you touch him, I will end you."

Holy fuck, he'd never heard her so pissed off.

As Enrico's face paled, Federico said, slow and thoughtful, "I kind of feel like I ought to be making a threat here, too." He rubbed his chin. "I don't know—no, wait, how about this? If the three of you don't knock it off and sit down, I am going to knock all your heads together until you agree to start acting like adults."

Squalo was willing to give Enrico this much: once he got an idea into his head, he didn't let go of it easily. "This is—"

The Ninth brought his hand down on the table hard enough to make the silverware rattle. "Sit down!" The gesture was so uncharacteristically violent that it got all of them looking at him instead of glaring at each other. The Ninth frowned at them. "That is an order."

Enrico had to pick up his chair and Squalo had to walk back around the table to return to Xanxus' side. She was standing, too, holding herself perfectly, dangerously still. There was Flame in her eyes, the only real sign one what she was feeling, because her expression was as frozen as a statue's. Squalo gripped her shoulder; the muscles under his hand were tight, but after a moment, she returned to her seat.

The Ninth puffed a breath through his mustache once they were all sitting and glaring at each other. "All right. Enrico. Apologize to your sister."

"What?" Enrico turned red, swelling up like the toad he was. "Apologize to *her*? What for?"

Squalo snarled in spite of himself and saw the man flinch. "How about

starting with the part where you suggested we just *let* her run the Varia? Or maybe the part where you said she shames the Vongola? Or, I know, the part where you implied she's a—"

"Any of those would be good, yes," the Ninth said. "I am *terribly* disappointed in you, my boy. I don't know how you could say such things about your sister—"

Everyone had a breaking point; that appeared to be Enrico's. He slammed his fist down, the gesture an unconscious reflection of his father's, and shouted, "Because they're true!" He glared at his father, shoulders heaving in his rage. "And because I'm sick of this—this *charade* where we pretend that a whore's daughter is actually part of the Vongola while we let her drag our name through the mud! For God's sake, Father, you could at least have some respect for Mother's memory, if nothing else—we all know that woman never saw you in her life before you went and took Xanxus from her!"

Xanxus was the first person to speak into the dead silence that followed that. Her voice was quiet and flat. "*What* did you say?"

Enrico's attention swung from his father's frozen expression to Xanxus. "What I should have said a long time ago." He pointed a finger across the table at her. "You're not my sister, you're not Vongola, you're not anything but a whore's daughter, and if you didn't know that then you're even more of a fool than I had thought, because it shows in every single thing you do."

Squalo tasted blood in his mouth from where he'd bitten down on his lip to keep himself from leaping across the table to kill the man where he stood—later, he would do that later, sometime when Xanxus hadn't gone the color of paper save for the hectic spots of color burning on her cheekbones. She turned to where the Ninth sat at the head of the table, his expression suddenly apprehensive. "Is this true?" she asked, still in that dead, flat tone.

Yes, Enrico fucking Vongola was going to die. Slowly, if Squalo could manage it, and screaming the entire time.

The Ninth was silent; when he spoke, it was in careful, soothing tones. "Enrico is speaking *very* much out of turn—"

Xanxus cut him off; her hands had begun to crackle with the Flames wreathing them. "Is. It. True."

The Ninth flinched away from the question. "I have always thought of

you as my daughter."

Stupid old man. Stupid, *stupid* old man. Squalo hadn't actually needed any more proof that the Ninth didn't understand Xanxus, but this was idiocy beyond measure when the one thing Xanxus valued more than anything else was the truth.

Xanxus stared at the Ninth, the man who'd told her he was her father, for a long, frozen moment. "You're not my father." Only a fool would have taken the emptiness of her voice as calm.

The Ninth winced. "Not technically by blood, but in everything else—"

"You fucking *liar*." Xanxus' voice rose sharply on the last word as her Will blazed up like a firestorm around her, more Wrath than Sky. Squalo gritted his teeth at the heat rolling off her, turning his skin tight, but stayed right where he was. Enrico, at least, looked like he was second-guessing his decision to reveal this truth, shrinking into his seat, while Federico looked pale and worried. Not that Squalo gave a fuck what any of *them* thought just then, but someone had to watch the boss' back. "All this time, you were lying to me, you shitty old man, all this time you were *lying*, you let me think I was—you let me think—you son of a bitch!" She stood, driving her chair back with such force that it fell over, her Will a corona blazing around her. "Was I the only one who didn't know?"

Her ostensible family exchanged looks; that asshole Enrico contriving to look satisfied in spite of everything, Federico and the Ninth looking worried, and Enrico's wife looking like she wanted to be anywhere else in the world. "Sis," Federico began.

God only knew what he thought he was going to tell her; Xanxus didn't give him the chance to get any further than that. "I'm not your sister!" she yelled, Flames roiling around her fists. "I'm not your sister, I'm not Vongola, I'm not—and you all knew it! Did you enjoy it? Did it make you *laugh*, did you think it was *funny* that I believed it? Hahah, that Xanxus, isn't it funny, she's nothing more than trash from the gutter, but she thinks she's Vongola—"

"Stop that!" Federico said, loud enough to cut through her shouting. "You're *not* trash and you *are* Vongola and anyone who says otherwise is *wrong*—"

"*Liar*!" Xanxus swept a hand across the table in front of her as she yelled, sending plates and glasses and silverware flying. "You're all liars, you're all—you—!" She took up the pitcher of orange juice and

hurled it at the wall, where it shattered and sprayed juice everywhere. "Everything I know is a fucking lie, everything is—"

Squalo took a breath and said, "Not everything, Boss."

All things considered, he wasn't surprised that she'd temporarily forgotten his presence. He saw a shudder roll through her; the gaze she turned on him wasn't quite sane, but she shaped the syllables of his name, near-silent, which was good enough to be going on.

He stood. "These assholes don't deserve any more of your time, Boss," he told her. "Come on. Let's go home."

He'd never come so close to giving her an outright command, which made a damn good reason to be nervous (on top of everything else). Her eyes blazed for a moment in reaction to that. Squalo held his ground and the rest of them held their breaths, until Xanxus nodded, clipped, and made for the door without another word.

Or not quite. She had it open when Federico tried one more time. "Sis —"

Xanxus stopped and looked over her shoulder; the door began to smolder under her fingers. "You're not my brother," she said, each word enunciated distinctly, and went out, stalking past the people gathered in the hall—most of the Ninth's guardians, plus Federico's right hand and Enrico's weaselly little secretary and a handful of nervous bodyguards.

Squalo lingered long enough to sweep a contemptuous gaze over her so-called family. "You're all a pack of fucking *idiots*," he told them, and spat just to get the taste of their stupidity out of his mouth before loping after Xanxus.

Just getting out of the house and back to Varia headquarters wasn't anywhere near enough to ease Xanxus' temper, not that Squalo had expected it to be. She tore through headquarters like a hurricane and the Varia were, to a person, smart enough to dive for cover when they saw her coming. Squalo trailed after her, most of his attention on her, and shrugged at the enquiring looks sent his way in her wake. Gossip being what it was, they'd all know something had gone down between the boss and her so-called family before lunch. Keeping them briefed wasn't really his primary concern just then.

Xanxus seized on the first object that came to her hand the second she

was inside the door of her quarters—the little table that she normally used to catch the contents of her pockets—and threw it against the wall. The frame cracked and a leg came loose; she strode across the room to pick it up and slam it into the wall again, and again, gouging chips of plaster that went flying everywhere out of the wall and reducing the table to so many pieces of kindling.

Squalo scattered the ones who would have lingered in the hallway to get a glimpse of Xanxus' rage by dint of glaring at them until they dispersed; when the coast was clear, he leaned in the doorway and watched her.

Xanxus snatched up a lamp and sent it hurtling through the air; Squalo settled in to wait. Furniture was furniture; if she vented some of her fury on it now, she'd have a lot more fun planning Enrico's assassination later.

Fucking hell, though, what had the Ninth and his boys been *thinking*? Letting Xanxus believe one thing while they all knew differently—Squalo couldn't see any way that wouldn't have turned out badly. Maybe if Xanxus hadn't been *Xanxus*, proud as Lucifer and just about as insecure, maybe then it could have worked, but Christ, didn't they *know* how the Vongola as a whole tended to treat her? No one had forgotten where she'd come from, no matter what kind of lip service they'd given her adoption, least of all Xanxus herself. That was probably most of the reason she hadn't ever bothered to adopt the manners of the nice girls—everyone would have just watched her that much more closely, waiting for the moment she'd do something to betray her origins.

Idiots, all of them, because not a one of them had the sense to see what she was. Maybe that was just what held the Vongola together—a single mass delusion that kept them from being able to recognize quality when they saw it.

Stupid fuckers.

The room was in ruins before Xanxus began to slow down, reduced to shredding the bedclothes in the middle of the destruction she'd wrought. She'd stayed silent through her fury, all her shouting done, and the only sound she made now was the ragged panting of her breath. Squalo watched her start in on the sheets, tearing them to strips, the wild energy from before slowing down and turning methodical, and figured it was time to speak up. He came away from the door, closing it behind him, and threw the lock. "Fourth squad's

been getting uppity lately. Want me to call them down to the training hall so you can pound some sense into them?"

He saw the way her shoulders stilled when he spoke, drawing up tense and tight, like she'd forgotten he was even there. Maybe she had. "What?" Her voice was hoarse, though she hadn't really done all that much shouting.

"If you still need to take something apart, the fourth squad would be a good place to start." Squalo kept his tone casual. Normal. Just another day at the Varia headquarters, nothing special to see here. "Cavilo has been getting mouthy, and don't even get me started on that brat Belphegor."

Her shoulders began to shake; he had a bad moment before he placed the sound she was making as laughter: rasping, half-voiced laughter. She dropped the ruined sheet and looked his way, a grim parody of a smile twisting her expression. "Didn't you fucking hear them?" she asked. "I'm not—I'm not anything, I'm just trash, just a stupid piece of trash—"

"Boss!" He'd never raised his voice to her, barring the sort of shouting that went on in training or on a mission, so it worked, at least as far as stopping her from saying those things about herself went. Didn't stop her from looking like she did, eyes all dark and hollow, like her fucking fake family had managed to reach inside her and eviscerate her. It made something in his chest hurt to see her looking like that. "Boss," he said again, softer, and went to her. Xanxus made a sound, a choked-off protest, when Squalo went to his knees and pressed her hand to his cheek. He ignored that and looked up at her. "You're still you, Boss. You're still *you*. You're the woman who took the Varia and held it when she was only eighteen, and you're the best damn boss we've ever had. None of us gives a shit whether you're Vongola blood or not—that's not how we decide those things. You know that." He kissed her knuckles. "We follow *you*. Not your name. Anyone who thinks it works like that is too stupid to let live." But then, that was Enrico fucking Vongola all over.

Xanxus inhaled, slow and stuttering. "Squalo—"

"Yours, Boss." He turned her hand over and kissed her palm. "It was *you* that I saw first, not the boss's daughter. And it was you who kicked my ass right there in the hallway up at that fucking house. *You*, Xanxus. Not the old man's daughter and not the Vongola, *you*. I lost my heart to you before I ever even knew your name."

She curled the hand he was holding into a fist. "Is that true?"

Squalo looked up at her, silently cursed the Ninth and his whole stinking family for the way doubt shadowed her eyes, and said, "I've never lied to you, Xanxus. Not once. I never will. I promise."

Then he had to bite his tongue to keep from saying anything more than that, because he suspected that making elaborate arguments would only make things worse.

Xanxus gazed down at him, her eyes dark and the muscles in her jaw working silently. Squalo waited, because at the bottom of it, this wasn't any different from all the other things between them. In the end, what happened rested in her hands and was her decision to make.

He really did hope that what happened was going to give Enrico fucking Vongola a pointed explanation of just how badly he'd fucked up, though.

"Never once?" Xanxus asked him eventually, breaking him out of the pleasant contemplation of what that explanation might consist of.

"I'd cut out my own tongue before I'd lie to you," he said, itching to wrap his fingers around her fist, but—not yet. Not until she'd decided whether she believed him.

Fuck. If the Ninth's idiocy had broken that, Squalo didn't know *what* he was going to do, but he knew it was going to involve blood and screaming. Lots of blood and screaming.

Neither of those was going to be his, either.

He was watching Xanxus closely enough to see when she swallowed, the muscles of her throat moving. "Be a waste." The words came slowly, rough and a little hoarse, as she uncurled her fingers. "If you did that."

Squalo leaned into her hand when she touched his cheek, relief making him giddy. "Guess that means I'll have to keep on telling you the truth, then."

"Promise?" Her voice was low, raw with the hurt she'd taken.

"I promise." Squalo covered her hand with his own and kissed her palm again.

Xanxus exhaled, shoulders easing marginally. "Get up here."

Squalo did, pushing himself up off his knees. Xanxus pressed against him the second it was feasible and did her best to burrow into his chest; the breath he took then felt sharp in his throat. "I've got you, Boss." He wrapped his arms around her, murmuring against her hair. "I've got you, Boss, I promise."

She made a noise against his shoulder, the content of it muffled but her acknowledgment clear, and pressed closer. Squalo set his fingers in her hair, stroking the tangled fall of it, and let her do as she pleased. When she began to shake, he just tightened his arms around her and didn't let go.

"I don't want to see anyone," Xanxus had said when Squalo got around to asking her whether she wanted to hit the training halls to pound out some of the morning's tension. He couldn't blame her much for that, so he suggested moving to his quarters ("No offense, Boss, but you can't stay here, it's a wreck.") and called for someone to get to work cleaning her rooms up.

Xanxus retreated to his bed immediately and dragged him with her, pretty much cocooning them in his blankets once they were there. Squalo let her do as she liked—wasn't like he was going to complain if she decided she wanted to spend her time in his arms, and the Varia could look after itself for a day without getting into too much trouble—and passed the silent hours of the morning and afternoon by running through what he knew of the Vongola's security. Getting Enrico probably wouldn't be too much of a challenge; he was a surplus son, not the heir. He did an underboss' duties, which meant traveling, but Squalo was willing to bet that his security wasn't half as tight as the Ninth's or Federico's.

They had Tartaruga on second squad; she was a devil with a rifle and a scope. That would do for Enrico.

Federico and the Ninth were going to be the real challenges. They were the heart and soul of the Family, with a full complement of guardians apiece and all the Family's security to stand between them and a hostile world. Getting through all that was going to take some doing.

Good thing he liked a challenge, because he had all the motivation in the world curled against his chest, brooding silently. He'd see the whole set of assholes dead and buried for her sake, and to hell with

anyone who tried to get in his way.

Would she want Massimo, too? He hadn't been at breakfast—he and his family lived separately, tending to the family's lemon groves. But he'd probably known the secret, if Federico and Enrico had. Maybe he'd have to leave it to Xanxus to decide whether she wanted to make a clean sweep or leave it all to Massimo to pick up the pieces. Squalo grinned at the thought of Massimo as the Tenth—Massimo, who manifestly had no interest in the job. Wouldn't *that* be something?

Hell, come to that, Xanxus could take it herself.

Squalo blinked into the hazy afternoon light, thinking that one through. Maybe she could, actually—it would depend on how many people had been in on the conspiracy surrounding her parentage. The Family at large didn't suspect anything—couldn't, if he, who had made knowing everything about Xanxus his top priority, hadn't known. It had to be a very small conspiracy. Federico, probably his right hand; the Ninth and his right hand, maybe a handful of others.

And if it came down to Massimo or Xanxus, Squalo knew where he'd put his money.

Would serve that shitty old man and his two-faced sons right, too, if Xanxus took the Family herself. Would show them all.

That pleasant chain of speculations occupied Squalo for the balance of the afternoon, until Xanxus stirred against his shoulder and said, "Call for something to eat, Christ. I can hear your stomach growling." She sounded subdued, but who could fault her for that?

"Sorry, Boss." Squalo stroked his fingers through her hair, not quite ready to move just yet, empty stomach notwithstanding. Not until he'd checked in with her, anyway. "You want anything?"

Her sigh brushed against his throat. "Not really."

That didn't seem like a good sign to him, not when it had been hours since that catastrophe of a breakfast and Xanxus could be relied upon to have a healthy appetite in conditions that made strong men turn green. Squalo thought fast and shrugged, careful of the weight of her head on his shoulder. "Okay, if you say so."

"I'm going to use your bathroom," she announced, pulling away from him and fighting her way out of the nest she'd made. She wasn't quite looking at him, God only knew why, and let her hair fall around her

face to shield her expression as she picked the dangle out of her hair, which was *all wrong* and felt kind of like a knife twisting in his gut to see.

Squalo kept that off his face and just pointed. "It's through there."

Xanxus nodded, dropped the dangle on his bedside table, and went, moving on silent feet. Squalo watched her, worry gnawing on him, till she'd closed the door behind her.

He heard the shower go on while he was trying to get the assholes down in the kitchen to understand that he wanted enough food for two people, but only one plate for it, but a bottle of the good scotch and two glasses to go with it, Christ, what was so difficult to understand about that? He got his point through, probably, and slipped into the bathroom to leave her some fresh towels after he'd done that.

She stayed in the shower for a long time; Squalo used that time to triage his email, sorting through the daily reports from the squad leaders and the reports from the handful of people they had in the field. Fortunately, things were quiet at the moment and there weren't any fires to put out, though there were plenty of artfully worded emails wanting to know what the fuck was going on with the boss. Squalo set those aside to deal with later and deleted the series of emails from the main house unread. Wasn't anything those assholes had to say that he cared to hear.

The water cut off before the food showed up, though just barely. Squalo watched the reflection on his laptop's screen, the way she opened the bathroom door a crack, and felt the steam-heavy air curl out from it, and carried on with what he was doing. "Been a quiet day," he said when her reflection moved out of the bathroom, a pale blur moving across his screen that went to his closet to rummage through it. "Lussuria's squad came back in. Says it went off without a hitch."

Xanxus grunted something that was an acknowledgment, probably; when he turned away from his laptop to look at her, she was pulling one of his dress shirts around her. The tails of it were just long enough to keep her decent, which was just as well—someone knocked as she did up the last button. He *had* gotten the kitchen assholes to understand, because they'd sent up a veritable mountain of food, a loaf of bread still hot from the oven and a plate of melon and what was probably the largest steak he'd seen in his life. Xanxus raised her

eyebrows when Squalo set the tray on the bed. "Hungry?"

"Starving." He tore a piece off the bread and started in on it, because the scent of the food made him suddenly aware of how ravenous he was. Xanxus didn't say anything, but after a few minutes of watching him, she stretched out a hand to pick up one of the pieces of melon and began nibbling on it. Squalo hid his smile, nudged the tray closer to where she was leaning against his pillows, and didn't say a word when her desultory nibbling turned into an all-out assault on the tray.

"You think you're sneaky," she said when they'd demolished the meal.

Squalo licked his fingers and grinned at her. "Dunno what you're talking about, Boss. I just told the kitchen I was really hungry. Guess they took me seriously."

Her mouth quirked, the closest she'd come to smiling since Enrico'd opened his stupid mouth. "You—"

Someone knocked, probably the kitchen staff coming back for the tray. "Good timing," Squalo noted, piling the empty dishes back onto the tray and sliding off the bed. He braced the tray against his hip so he could get the door, ready to compliment the staff on their timing, and stopped short when he came face-to-face with Federico Vongola.

Squalo stared, shocked to see him in the heart of Varia headquarters—people from the main house never came down to visit them and always expected to be waited upon at the main house. "What the fuck," he said, too surprised to even pretend to be polite. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Federico looked solemn, worried around the eyes; his right hand was standing behind him and looking on edge. "I'm looking for my sister. I need to talk to her."

Squalo barred the door with his arm, just in case Federico got any bright ideas about barging in, and shot a look Xanxus' way. Her face had gone pale and her eyes were dark under the damp tangle of her hair; she shook her head, *no*, silently. All right, then. Squalo shifted the weight of the tray on his hip, looked Federico straight in the eye, and said, "She's not here."

Federico's mouth tightened; behind him, Fedele rolled his eyes. Squalo tensed, ready for them to try to force their way in or for Federico to call him on the lie. Then Federico sighed. "Damn. I'd hoped she'd be with you. If you see her before I do, would you give her a message for

me?"

Squalo felt his mouth twist. "Don't you think you people have said enough for one day?"

It was a palpable hit; Federico grimaced and raked sandy hair back from his eyes. "All the things we've said so far have been the wrong ones, I think. I'm trying to find the right ones. Please. If you see her, tell her that she is Vongola—she has all the heart and fire of the Vongola, all the strength and pride of us, and that's all that matters. All that should matter. But if it's the blood that bothers her—she's got that, too. It's not Dad's blood, but they traced her mother back to the Second. It's a collateral line, sure, but it still counts as Vongola blood. She's every bit as much of a Vongola as I am." He stopped and ran his hand over his face. "Still not the right words," he muttered, as if Squalo weren't standing right there watching him. He looked up again, fixing his eyes on Squalo's. "Just—tell her all that for me. And tell her that she's still my sister and that I love her and that I'm worried about her. Enrico was wrong, *is* wrong, about everything, and he's in so much trouble right now, you wouldn't believe." Federico's voice trailed off on that, grimly satisfied.

Squalo waited a beat to see whether he was going to go on. When he didn't, he asked, "You done?" Federico nodded. "Great. Hold this." He pushed the tray into Federico's hands and shut the door in his bemused face.

The bark of Federico's startled laughter reached through the door. So did the way he lifted his voice to say, "Take care of Xanxus for me."

Squalo made a face at the door—teach granny to suck eggs, huh?—and turned back to Xanxus, who'd pulled her knees up to her chest and was hugging them. "The fuck." Her voice was pitched low, frustrated. "The fuck are they up to now?"

Time to crack the scotch open, Squalo decided, and did so, splashing a generous amount into each glass and setting them on the bedside table. "Dunno, Boss." He climbed back into bed with her, settling himself at her shoulder and spreading a hand against the tense line of her back. "You really care?"

"No." That came out sounding more like wishful thinking than actual conviction, but hell if he was going to call her on it. Xanxus buried her face in her knees. "Hate them all."

"Can't blame you for that," Squalo said, carefully, letting her feel her

way through this. He knew what he wanted to do—burn the whole Family to the ground and piss on the ashes, and the only one he might regret was Federico, maybe, or Massimo—but he hadn't grown up thinking of them as his family or trying to get them to see him for his own worth.

So he rubbed his hand across her shoulders, slow, and let her get on with whatever it was she was doing—thinking, brooding, whatever. Eventually she said, muffled, "Was he telling the truth?"

"Just now, you mean?" Her head moved, the nod buried against her knees. Squalo considered it, the tightness of Federico's mouth and the worried line between his eyebrows, plus all things he'd ever seen of the man in other circumstances. "Mm. I'm pretty sure he believed what he was saying." Didn't make it true, of course. For all they knew, the Ninth could have spun another line of bullshit for his favorite son to make him feel better.

He felt a shiver run through Xanxus then as she curled herself into a tighter ball. Squalo bit his lip and smoothed his hand up to knead her nape, where the muscles were so tense they felt like cables under his fingers. "Would it make it better or worse if it was the truth?" Start there, and they could work out from that.

"Don't know." Her voice was soft enough that Squalo had to strain after the words. "I don't know anything anymore."

Squalo worked his fingers over her nape, which wasn't having an appreciable effect, and thought about that. "That's not quite true," he said, feeling his way along the words carefully. "You know you have me."

Xanxus didn't say anything to that, not at first, and Squalo wondered whether he'd overstepped himself. When she finally stirred, turning her face to look at him from under the fall of her hair, he breathed easier. "I have you," she repeated, not quite a statement.

"Yeah, you do. I'm yours, no matter what." Squalo brushed his fingers through the fall of her hair, combing it back from her face. "I promise."

Xanxus closed her eyes and sighed, deep and slow, and flowed out of the ball she'd curled herself into to twine her arms around him. "Mine," she said against his ear. "I have that."

"Yeah, Boss." Squalo wrapped his arms around her and pressed his lips

to her hair. "I love you."

She sighed again, her arms tightening around him. "Mine."

"Yeah," he promised her. "No matter what." And as long as they had that straight, there wasn't anything the rest of her godforsaken Family could do that would touch them.

Chapter 2

Squalo hadn't quite gotten used to consistently waking up in bed with Xanxus, but he thought that perhaps he could. There were worse fates in life.

A night's sleep seemed to have restored some of Xanxus' balance, or the fact that even she couldn't be wound to fever pitch for too long before fatigue set in had done the trick. She was leaning over Squalo when he woke up, watching him, and had leaned down to kiss him almost before he'd managed to blink the sleep from his eyes.

Which was something else a man could get used to. Squalo hummed into her mouth, reaching for her. He managed to get a taste of her skin against his palms before she caught his hands and pressed them down, pinning them against his pillow.

The sleepy heat that had been furling around him tightened abruptly at that; Squalo groaned against Xanxus' mouth, suddenly wide-awake and hungry for her, for this. Xanxus shook over him, her laughter brushing against his mouth, almost silent, and settled herself over him, pinning him to the mattress and plundering his mouth. Squalo kissed back, willing to let her have anything she cared to take from him. "Boss," he murmured against her mouth. "Yours, Boss."

"Yeah," she said, between kisses. "Mine." She squeezed his wrists and a ripple of heat danced through him in response. "All mine." Xanxus raised her head then, just far enough for him to see the way she was smiling, sleek and pleased. "Just the way you like it."

"Fuck, yeah." Squalo grinned back at her, dizzy with how beautiful she was and the knowledge that he was hers. "Just the way I love it."

Xanxus shifted over him, rubbing against the hardness of his cock and smirking when he groaned. "I noticed." Her tone was arch.

"Boss..." Squalo bit his lip to keep from bucking up against her. "Boss, Xanxus, please..."

Something in her eyes went softer. "Yeah," she said, quieter, and gathered his hands together, pinning them over his head as she kissed him again, stroking her tongue into his mouth. Squalo groaned for her, breathless, and shuddered when she raised herself up over him to guide his cock into her. She settled over him again, her breath sighing

out of her as he gasped, and pressed him down against the mattress, riding him. Squalo let her, subsiding against the mattress and moaning into her kisses as she took her pleasure from him, grinding herself against him and humming into his mouth with it. She was, without a doubt, the most amazing thing in the world.

Something like euphoria hummed through his veins as he lay under her, watching her move over him. "Boss," he murmured to her, "Xanxus," and "Love you so much," which was when she arched over him, her body seizing on his as open pleasure swept across her face. Squalo shuddered under her, not quite able to keep his hips from rolling up against hers, driving half-voiced sounds from her throat with each shallow thrust, until she leaned down and kissed him ruthlessly as she tightened her fingers around his wrists. Squalo groaned at the silent reminder of her claim on him, losing himself in her all over again, dazed with how much that was, how *lucky* he was, as pleasure wrung him out.

He drowsed a little after, slipping his arms around Xanxus once she released his hands and tracing his hand over the smooth skin of her back. "Should stay like this," he murmured to her. "Can we, Boss?"

"Mm." Xanxus nuzzled his throat, mouthing the line of it. "Get bored eventually."

"Never, Boss." He grinned when she nipped his throat, gratified by her good mood. "No, really."

She bit him again, which was starting to give his cock some ideas about getting up and going again, and then raised her head and said, "Can't. Gotta go up to the house."

So much for the thought of another round. Squalo looked up at Xanxus, took a careful grip on his tone, and said, "Okay, Boss. If that's what you want." There could be plenty of reasons she might want to go up to the house, from launching a frontal assault to starting reconnaissance on its defenses.

Xanxus' eyes slid sideways, away from his. "He said—I want to know. If it was true."

Or Federico could have successfully planted a bug in her head yesterday evening. Not that Squalo was surprised that it had stuck; the man's "message" had been pretty pointed. So, okay. If that was what she wanted... "Sure thing, Boss. I'll hold the Ninth upside down and shake the answers out of him, if you want."

A ghost of a smile touched her mouth. "Like to see that."

"Just say the word, Boss." Squalo leaned his head back against the pillow, running through the possibilities, and concluded that unless Federico *had* been lying after all, he'd probably have to let go of the plan for killing the whole worthless lot of them. "Just promise me that we're going to kill Enrico eventually?"

Xanxus' eyes went hard and flat at the name; since she was still lounging over him, Squalo could feel her chest vibrate as she growled. "Oh, I want him dead." Then she took a breath. "But they'll all know—we can't."

Squalo grinned at her. "They might *know*, Boss, but we're the fucking Varia. They'll never be able to pin it on us, not in a million years."

She was tempted; he could see it in the wistfulness in her eyes. "Mm."

That wasn't a *no*, so Squalo relaxed, grinning at her. "You know that no one would actually *miss* him. I mean, really, you'd be doing the Family a *favor*."

Xanxus narrowed her eyes at him. "Stop that." But she was smirking, so that was all right.

"Just putting it out there, Boss, that's all." He made a mental note to go ahead and start the recon on it once they'd managed to shake the Ninth down for some answers. Hell, maybe if he timed it right, he could present a mission plan to her for her birthday present.

The look Xanxus gave him, heavy-lidded and amused, said that she wasn't fooled at all. She didn't say anything about it, though, and after a moment the amusement faded out of her expression. "You think I'm crazy for wanting to go up there, don't you?"

"I think you're better than all of them put together, Boss." Squalo touched her jaw, tracing his fingertips along the set line of it. "You could wash your hands of them, the whole lot of them, and it'd be fine with me. And nothing less than they deserve."

Xanxus leaned against his fingers. "Maybe." Her voice had dropped, gone quiet. "Maybe I should." Whatever she was looking at, it wasn't him. Wasn't even in the room. "I just—I want to know. Why. Why would they—why would they *do* that?"

Because they were just smart enough to see that she was worth

keeping around, but not smart enough to understand how to do it. Squalo sighed. "They're idiots, that's why." He cupped her cheek, stroking it. "They probably have reasons, I guess. I'll help you beat it out of them."

Her mouth quirked. "Can't ask for much more than that, I guess." She turned her face and kissed his palm. "Come on. Let's get cleaned up so we can get this over with." Her eyes glittered at him from beneath her eyelashes. "Think that shower of yours is big enough you could scrub my back?"

"Dunno, Boss." Squalo grinned at her again. "Let's find out."

What with one thing and another, the morning was half-gone by the time they got themselves dressed and out the door. Xanxus walked like a woman set on doing a grim duty, which Squalo supposed she was, and he spent more of his attention on her than he did anything else.

As it turned out, that was a mistake.

Xanxus was the one who spotted the pack of guardians and guardians-in-training who came boiling out of house as they approached it. "The fuck," she said, sounding more puzzled than anything else. "What's got them all stirred up?"

Because they *were* stirred up, some of them showing actual Flame and all of them looking angry, and huh. Squalo would have thought they'd have called in the Varia if there was going to be a war. "Dunno, Boss —"

Someone in that flock of geezers and geezers-to-be gave a shout and the whole mob of them surged forward. Squalo didn't think much of it at first—why should he have done? He had it on Federico Vongola's authority that Xanxus was Vongola. They had a right to be there.

The two of them were surrounded before it quite made sense, ringed around by men and women with angry faces and hands that toyed too freely with guns and blades. It wasn't the full double set, Squalo saw; the old man's right hand and Rain and Sun were missing, and so was Federico's own right hand.

The old man's Cloud gestured, imperious. "Bring them," she said, voice cold. Purezza's companions practically jumped to obey, laying hands on Squalo and the boss with a kind of eagerness that was worrisome.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" Xanxus demanded, matching that collection of glares with her own, trying to shake their hands off her.

They—it was Federico's people who had her, his Lightning and his Cloud—hung onto her like grim death, and Purezza smiled. Showed her teeth. Something like that. "Go ahead," she said. "Give us an excuse." Which was not an explanation in the slightest.

Squalo considered the odds—he had the old man's Storm and Federico's Rain on him, and there were another four of them besides to contend with. Wasn't great odds, not really, especially since too many of them favored guns over blades, but he and the boss might be able to deal with it anyway.

Xanxus drew herself up to her full height and said, "I want to know what the *fuck* is going on here and I want to know right the fuck now."

Not that it did much good; Purezza was the scariest of the Ninth's people for a damn good reason. She said, "Playing dumb isn't going to help you now," and gestured at the rest of them.

Xanxus snarled at the hands that prodded her forward, but there was something about the way Federico's people were looking at her that put a cold feeling in the pit of Squalo's stomach. They had murder in their eyes and he thought that maybe Purezza had meant what she'd said about needing an excuse. Squalo swallowed. "Boss."

She glanced his way and her mouth tightened, but after a second she nodded.

That twisted inversion of an honor guard herded them inside, and if Squalo hadn't already realized something was wrong, the atmosphere inside the house would have warned him. A pall hung over the house, shrouding its inhabitants in misery; the people who normally bustled through its halls at a brisk pace stood around, their faces blank and shocked. That shock tended to twist into something else when they caught sight of the Ninth and Federico's people hustling Xanxus past them, contorting with more hostility than Squalo knew how to account for even given the prior morning's argument. The Vongola were looking at Xanxus like they hated her—had decided it was okay to hate her openly—and Squalo couldn't help being sure that something had gone horribly, horribly wrong.

The Ninth was in his study, and his Rain and Mist were with him. So were Massimo and Enrico, but not Federico, which made Squalo's

stomach clench. The Ninth's face was pale and drawn, like a man under some great strain. Massimo just looked bewildered, as if some certainty he'd leaned on had been kicked out from beneath him, but Enrico—he stood back with his secretary and they both looked very solemn, but somehow *satisfied* at the same time.

Purezza went to one knee for the Ninth. "We brought her."

The Ninth didn't respond; he looked at Xanxus, fixing his eyes on her face, searching it for something. It was Staffieri who said, "That was fast," and made it come out sounding like a question.

"They were walking up to the house, cool as you please," the old man's Storm said. He glanced sideways at Squalo. "Didn't even put up a fight."

"You were coming *back*?" Enrico's voice tilted up with disbelief. "You have a lot of nerve, you know that?"

"No, I don't." Xanxus had retreated to the flat, annoyed tone that usually came right before she exploded. "I don't know what the fuck is going on here, but I'd like to."

"Nice act," he congratulated her. "Just the right amount of confused outrage. I'm impressed. You should have been an actress."

Please. The only thing that impressed that little toad was his own self-importance. Squalo bit his tongue on that, because there were a few too many angry people in the same room as his boss for him to go running off his mouth. He cleared his throat. "Let's pretend that we actually were just walking up to the house without a clue, why don't we, so someone fill us in. Who are we at war with?" And more importantly, why were they laying it at the boss' feet?

"Where the hell's Federico?" Xanxus added as the room shifted and muttered.

It was the wrong thing to have said; Squalo saw people's backs go stiff and jaws set in response.

"Federico is dead." The Ninth's voice was quiet and strangely distant. Shock, maybe. "He died very early this morning." His gaze rested on his adopted daughter's face, bleak with grief. "Why did you do this thing?"

What—what the *fuck*? What the fucking fuck, Federico was dead and

the old man thought that *Xanxus* had—

Squalo whipped his head around to stare at her; the blood had drained out of her face. "He can't be dead." She shook her head, her tone absolutely flat with her refusal to accept what they'd just said. "He can't be. You're lying again." Her hands curled into fists at her side. "Why do you always lie?"

The Ninth stared at her, things moving across his face that Squalo didn't have names for, while his Guardians shifted again, uneasily. It was Enrico who said, "Who's lying? They found my baby brother in a ditch this morning, with his head—"

"Enrico!" Martelli's voice was sharper than Squalo had ever heard it as he cut Enrico off, sparing them the details. Sparing the Ninth the details, maybe.

Annoyance flickered over Enrico's expression, but he shut his mouth, shook his head as though he were clearing it, and picked up again. "He's *dead* and you can stop playing dumb about it, because you forgot to make sure of his right hand, you psychopathic bitch."

"What—*what*?" Xanxus sounded as blank as she looked, like she would have been reeling if only she had the room to do it. "What are you talking about?"

"Fedele Rizzo says that Federico received a message from you early this morning, asking for a meeting." Staffieri's voice was steady, calm as only the old man's right hand could be. "Federico, having no reason not to trust you, went, taking only Fedele with him as a bodyguard, as is—was—his custom. You met in the garden at the south edge of the estate. Fedele reports that you got the drop on them, incapacitated him, and then fought Federico and executed him. Because, and here I quote Fedele quoting you, 'You're not my brother.'"

Xanxus' face had gone white; she shook her head, denying it. "No. No, it's a lie. I never did that."

"We have an eye witness," Enrico said.

"I didn't do it!" Xanxus flung out a hand, pointing Squalo's way or reaching for him or something. "Squalo, tell them!"

Jesus, what was he *doing*, standing by and saying nothing? "It's true. She hasn't been out of my sight since yesterday." It felt like his brain had gone slow and sticky—shock? But he ought to have been faster on

his feet than this. "There's no way she could have killed anyone this morning. There's been some kind of mistake."

"That's precisely what I'd expect you to say." Enrico's sneer twisted his mouth. "We all know you're her dog, running at her heels. You'll say whatever she tells you to say."

"Better a dog than a toad," Squalo retorted, itching to drop his blade into his hands and slice the sneer off Enrico's face.

Xanxus ignored them both, looking around her, maybe for someone who'd believe her. "I didn't do it!" she protested. "I didn't, I—he—I swear I didn't do it!"

"I suppose it was just someone who looked and spoke and acted just like you?" Enrico asked, tone mocking. "Some other traitor to the Family who blew my brother's head off this morning?"

What there was left of Xanxus' temper cracked. Her Will blazed up and she went for Enrico, or tried to. There were far too many guardians in the room for it to have worked, and in any case, from what Squalo could see, she hadn't even thought about defending herself from them. Maybe she'd been counting on him to do it for her or maybe she just hadn't cared. Didn't much matter either way; she got about two steps before they swept her feet out from under her and took her down, Federico's guardians tackling her from all sides. Squalo started to move and stopped short when Gemello, the old man's Storm, tucked the muzzle of his gun up against Squalo's temple and said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you, kid."

Squalo ground his teeth, helpless to stop the way Federico's Cloud was pinning Xanxus' hands behind her back and furious about it. "I'm telling you that she didn't do it," he gritted out.

"Save your breath," Gemello advised him over the sounds of Xanxus' curses as she bucked and twisted, trying to break free of the bodies piling on top of her.

It took three people to subdue her, and Martelli's Rain Flame to douse most of her Flame. When she was reduced to panting under the weight of the people holding her down, the Ninth said, slow, "What am I to do with you, Xanxus? Why did you do this? Were you so betrayed that this was how you felt you had to repay me?"

It wasn't until then that Squalo realized how deep the trouble really was. The Ninth was soft, for a boss, showed more mercy than

sometimes seemed prudent, and until then he'd assumed that the old man would have some of that mercy stored up for his adopted daughter.

Only she was his *adopted* daughter and Federico had been his own blood. And the Ninth looked grieved, and exhausted, but not merciful.

Xanxus didn't say anything at all. Squalo could just see the way her fingers flexed and how she glared at Enrico, eyes burning. Maybe she hadn't even heard the Ninth at all, given how fixated on Enrico she was.

The Ninth gave her a moment longer and then shook his head as he sighed.

"Your orders, Boss?" Staffieri asked.

When the Ninth didn't say anything, Enrico stepped in. "How about an eye for an eye?" he asked, tone vicious.

Squalo went cold all over. Fuck the gun Gemello was holding on him; if the Ninth gave that order, he was going to take the room apart or die trying.

The Ninth held them all on tenterhooks for too long before he sighed again. "...no. Spilling more blood will not bring my boy back to me." He passed a hand over his face. "Summon the Vendicare," he said, slow and measured. "Let them deal with her."

Squalo's gut twisted, though he wasn't sure whether that was relief or apprehension. The Vendicare might have been the mafia's bogeyman (*Be good, child, mothers told their children, or the Vendicare will come to take you away*) but better imprisoned and alive than dead, right? And as long as they were alive and together, even the Vendicare wouldn't be able to hold them for long.

Gemello prodded Squalo. "And this one, Boss?"

The Ninth looked at him and frowned. "Send him back to the Varia. You will resume command of them, but there will be no new missions until we have set our house in order. Keep your people in line until I send for you."

What—*what*? Squalo gaped at the Ninth—he couldn't be serious, could he?

"All right, you heard the man." Gemello nudged him again. "Come on, get moving."

"You can't—you can't do this," Squalo protested, not moving from the spot. The Ninth *couldn't* split them up, surely he had to know better than that.

"I think that you'll find that I can." The Ninth's voice was very cool. "I don't believe that you would care to know all the things I am capable of doing."

Squalo shook off his shock and the slow, stupid way his brain was moving. "You don't even know what you're doing!" By the time he got that out, he was shouting. "You shitty old man, she didn't even do it, and you're just going to—to—"

Apparently he was. The Ninth gestured and his people moved to seize Squalo's arms, probably so they could drag him out of the room. Squalo struggled against him, desperation lending him strength. "Boss—Boss! Xanxus!"

That pulled her back from wherever it was she'd gone inside her head; she began to struggle against the people holding her down, snarling something wordless and full of rage. Squalo twisted against the hands holding him—just let him get a hand free and they'd see who was capable of doing what—

"Oh, for God's sake," Gemello muttered, exasperated, and reversed the gun in his hands. Squalo tried to duck away from him as the man brought it down, and couldn't quite escape the way it cracked against his skull.

The last thing Squalo heard before unconsciousness swallowed him was the sound of Xanxus yelling his name.

Squalo woke up dizzy, disoriented, and sick to his stomach. He promptly rolled onto his hands and knees and retched until there was nothing left in his stomach but bile and acid. That process absorbed most of his attention; it wasn't until his stomach had stopped heaving that he became aware that he was performing for an audience.

Someone applauded. "That, ladies and gentlemen, is how you make an entrance."

Lussuria. It figured. Squalo pushed himself to his feet and dragged a

hand across his mouth as the world spun and twisted around him. It resolved into the front hall of their headquarters, and it wasn't just Lussuria—it was the rest of the squad leaders, too, all of whom were looking at him with barely disguised curiosity.

Lussuria continued. "It takes special talent to make an entrance like that. Not just anybody can get dropped on our doorstep by the Ninth's own Storm, puke his guts up, and then come up looking good."

"Shut up, Lussuria," Levi grunted. He fixed a fierce look on Squalo. "Where's the boss?"

Squalo's disoriented memories clicked into place in a rush that made his stomach attempt another rebellion. He ignored that and swung himself around, intent on the doors and doing something—getting out, getting to Xanxus, getting her *back*—

"You really don't want to do that." Lussuria laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, stopping him before he could stagger more than a few steps toward the door.

Squalo snarled something at him, he didn't even know what, because like *fuck* did he not want to do this. He was going to get the boss back and then they were going to set the Ninth on *fire*—

Lussuria gave Squalo a brisk shake, one that made his head throb and his stomach lurch. "No, I mean it. They've got people on all the entrances and I'm pretty sure they meant it when they said that they'd shoot anyone who stepped outside without permission." The smile he gave Squalo was bright and friendly and as artificial as the blue of his hair. "So how about you pull yourself together and tell us what the *fuck* is going on?"

Guards. Guards on the Varia headquarters. What the fuck, the Ninth couldn't do that! Couldn't send his daughter—adopted daughter—to the Vendicare, either, except that he was going to do that, too. Fuck. Fucking hell.

Which didn't do a damn thing to keep the squad leaders from ringing him and staring him down like they were prepared to beat the answers out of him if they had to.

Shaking his head to clear it did nothing more than make it swim, but Squalo shoved that and his anguish to the side as unproductive. He reached for the calm, analytical mindset that went with mission-planning. "Mission room," he said, conscious of the rank-and-file

members of the Varia who were also lurking around and looking curious. "We'll talk there."

Lussuria nodded, apparently satisfied with that, and turned him loose.

The mission room really wasn't anything more than a glorified conference room, not that it much mattered. The seven of them gathered around the long table, leaving the seat at the head unoccupied out of habit. Squalo glanced at Xanxus' place and gritted his teeth, promising himself that someone was going to pay for that, and soon.

"Where's the boss?" Levi demanded again, before they'd even finished arranging themselves in their respective seats.

Squalo took a deep breath, because there was nothing for it. "Federico Vongola is dead."

Surprise rippled across their faces—even Mammon's mouth made a tiny O underneath the shadow of his cowl. Squalo gave them a moment to make the necessary mental adjustments to the Vongola's new political landscape; when Cavilo's eyes narrowed and she began drumming out a staccato rhythm against the tabletop with her fingernails and Calla had gone perfectly still in her seat, he pushed on. "His right hand says he saw the boss do it. The Ninth is letting the Vendicare take her."

The six of them went silent and still; the clock on the wall ticked off five full seconds before Sera snorted. "Bullshit," she said. "There's no way the boss left a witness. What the fuck is really going on?"

And that was Sera, all right. No one took Varia pride quite as seriously as she did.

"I wish to God I knew." Squalo raked a hand through his hair. "She *didn't* kill him, I can vouch for that much, but he's dead and the Ninth is convinced that she did, so somebody is lying and I am going to make them *pay* once I figure out who it is."

Sera's smirk faded, but it was Levi who growled like the rumble of an approaching storm. "They gave the boss to the Vendicare? And you *let* them?"

"Let them?" The rage he'd only sort of managed to shunt to the side flared through Squalo again. "Of course I didn't fucking just *let* them, you son of a bitch—"

"Obviously not," Lussuria interjected before Squalo could really get going or Levi could do more than bristle. "Given the size of that goose egg you've got, I expect that you approached things with your normal vigor. We wouldn't expect anything less, would we?" Which had the effect of cooling things off, however briefly.

"What happened?" Calla's voice was very quiet, but people tended to shut up and listen when she spoke, so the volume didn't much matter. Maybe it was the way she tended to play with her knives when she spoke that did it, though for his part, Squalo was more concerned by the half-mad glitter in her eyes. She turned that glittering gaze on him then as she measured out her words. "From the beginning. And leaving in more details this time."

"Yeah, good idea." Lussuria steepled his fingers before his chin. "This have anything to do with yesterday?"

Yesterday. God. Had it really only been *yesterday* that all of this had changed? Fucking *hell*.

Squalo scrubbed his hand over his face and tried to set his thoughts in order. His head ached fiercely, throbbing in time to his pulse, but when he thought he had a grip on things, he started at the beginning. None of them needed to know what it was that Enrico had said, just that he'd insulted her and that the whole family had gotten dragged into it, and that it had ended with Xanxus rejecting them and walking out. Sera looked like she suspected there was more to it than that, and so did Lussuria, but both of them let it lie. Levi frowned when Squalo mentioned Federico's visit, but that could have been as much for the fact that Levi was more than a little bit in love with the boss himself and was always annoyed by reminders that she didn't return the sentiment. And Sera and Mammon both sat up straighter when Squalo related Enrico's description of how Federico Vongola had been killed. "Only I know she didn't do it," he concluded, "because I was with her all night long."

Normally that would have been Lussuria or Cavilo's cue to leer, but neither of them said anything. Well, at least they were taking this seriously.

Sera glanced Mammon's way almost idly. "Mist?" she drawled.

"Undoubtedly." Their tiny Mist specialist folded his hands together where he was hovering handspan's height over the table. "A powerful one to be able to fool both the Ninth's heir and his right hand, but it

could be done."

"So we tell the Ninth to look at the evidence again and find the Mist user who did it," Levi rumbled.

Lussuria sighed, shaking his head and smiling. "Levi, my young friend, you are painfully trusting. How on *earth* have you survived the Varia this long?"

Sera cast a look Squalo's way. "The Ninth definitely believes she did it?" When he nodded, recalling the set, grim lines of the old man's expression, she sighed. "Figures."

Cavilo, meanwhile, had gone sharp-eyed and—yeah, it was about time for that, Squalo thought. She tilted her head to the side and asked, "So who's leading the Varia?"

"Xanxus leads the Varia." He made his tone as absolutely flat and forbidding as possible. "I'll hold her place until we get her back."

"No one's ever successfully escaped the Vendicare," Mammon observed while Squalo and Cavilo stared at each other across the table.

"Then Xanxus will be the first," Squalo said, refusing to be the first to look away and thinking rapidly. Cavilo was the ambitious type; she hadn't challenged Xanxus yet, but the boss and he had figured that the day was coming. "We're not going to let that shitty old man get away with this."

"We're not?" Sera inquired. "Who's we?"

Fuck. God *damn* it, Cavilo didn't need any help.

"Who do you think it is?" Squalo asked as Cavilo's mouth curled. "The Ninth seems to have forgotten that we're the *independent* assassination unit."

"The Ninth's not the only one." Cavilo tilted her head a bit further, smirking. "I'm not sure I recognize your authority to just order us around like that."

Squalo wanted to throw his head back and scream with frustration—they didn't have *time* for this!—but there were rules and forms, and she'd just invoked them both. "Don't you?" he gritted out from between clenched teeth.

The smile that peeled her lips back from her teeth was positively vulpine. "No. I do not."

His head ached and his stomach was still churning, but there was nothing for it now. Squalo pushed his chair back and stood. "Training hall. Let's get this settled."

Cavilo smiled and unfolded herself from her seat. "With pleasure."

Lussuria fell in with Squalo as they all headed for the training hall. "You do realize that you're probably concussed, don't you?"

The thought actually had occurred to him, what with the aching skull and the nausea. It was just irrelevant, was all. Squalo grimaced at Lussuria. "So?"

He was pretty sure that had just been an eye roll behind those sunglasses. "Just an observation, I suppose. You survive this, though, you'd better haul your skinny ass down to the infirmary and get yourself checked over."

It wasn't even worth dignifying that with a response, so Squalo didn't bother and considered Cavilo and her challenge instead. She was prowling down the hall, well ahead of them by this point, slinking along like the half-rabid weasel she was. She was tiny—the top of her head would have barely hit his chin, had he cared to stand next to her, but in his experience all that really meant was that she was in a pretty good spot to tear a man's throat out with her teeth. Or so he'd heard; he hadn't been part of that job. Xanxus had said it'd been a sight, though.

His gut twisted again; Squalo ground his teeth together and channeled that into his mounting fury. The Vendicare probably already had her, and he had to deal with this instead? He wanted to scream with how pointless it was.

They picked up people as they went; by the time they hit the training hall, most of the Varia in the building had found a reason to be there, either because the reason for the fight had flashed through the building on some near-telepathic level or, more likely, because everyone knew something was up and figured this for the best chance to find out what.

That made it easier, in a way. At least he'd be able to get this settled in one fell swoop.

People cleared the floor without a word being said; Cavilo sauntered out to hold it. Squalo followed after her. "Federico Vongola is dead," he announced in case there was anyone who hadn't heard. "The Ninth says the boss did it and gave her to the Vendicare. He's wrong. I say I'm in charge until we get the boss back. Cavilo challenges that."

Noise ran around the room, men and women muttering and shifting where they stood, accompanied by the creak of leather and the chime of metal against metal as they settled their hands on weapons or turned to look at each other, but no one spoke up. They were Varia; they knew how it worked. Squalo waited a beat to be sure, waiting until he was certain the sober faces ringing the room were satisfied with that explanation, and loosened his sword in its scabbard as he looked to Cavilo. "Let's get this over with."

Cavilo already had her bolas in her hand, spinning them slowly as a smile spread across the pretty, elfin features of her face. Squalo let his blade drop out of its sheath and they circled each other, slow, watching each other, before Cavilo feinted left and used her speed to spring forward and tangle Squalo's arm.

Squalo supposed that had been the plan, anyway. He stepped aside from the whistling spin of her bolas and dropped low, blade angled to guard himself against her and all his attention and seething anger narrowing to focus on this one simple task. Cavilo was good—she recovered even faster than he'd thought she would—and whirled on him again, already pressing another attack. This was straightforward, even easy, the kind of thing he'd trained his whole life to do.

More importantly, it was in the way of getting Xanxus back and punishing everyone responsible for taking her away in the first place. And Squalo refused to let anything stand between him and that goal.

Something of that must have shown on his face; Cavilo's bold smile dimmed as they faced each other again, showing a moment's uncertainty.

Squalo showed her his teeth in reply and threw himself forward, only one thought in his aching head—to end her challenge quickly and decisively. Cavilo wasn't one of the ones who fought for the joy of the fight; she fought for other reasons, so he had no need of any of the techniques that had made him the second Sword Emperor. There was just the brutal business of closing with her, dodging the weighted balls as she sought to tangle his feet, aiming for her throat and then reversing the strike when she eeled away from it, the harsh sound of

their breathing as they grappled and the curse he grunted when she dropped the concealed knife out of her sleeve and into her hand to lay a slice open down his ribs.

She smiled then, maybe anticipating victory or maybe because she'd gotten first blood, who even knew. Squalo heard himself snarl and pushed through the flash of pain and the nausea, because he trained with Xanxus on a regular basis and this was nothing, *less than nothing*, compared to a session with her. Cavilo's expression changed a fraction of a second too late; she still managed to avoid the weight of his fist slamming into her side, but not the kick that he swept under her, looking for the vulnerable joint of her knee. He sacrificed his off arm to the bolas, barely feeling the impact of the weights when they hit his shoulder as adrenaline surged through him, mingling with the red taste of his fury, and he wondered whether this was how Xanxus felt when her Flame blazed in her hands as he drove the hilt of his sword against Cavilo's temple.

She dropped but didn't go under; she carried a gun, too, but all her bullets were the ordinary kind. Squalo kicked it out of her hand, tasting something like contempt as he did, and shook the bolas off his arm as he dropped his weight on top of her. His arm ached when he seized her hands to twist them and pin them behind her back, but he ignored that and gripped the short, fine spikes of her hair to pull her head back. "Am I going to have to kill you?"

Her first reply was nothing more than a snarl. Squalo shook her until she spat, "I concede."

"Damn straight. Challenge me again and I'll do it. I won't even blink." Squalo relaxed his grip and stood, keeping her in his peripheral vision as he looked at the rest of them. "Who's next?"

No one replied immediately. Squads glanced at each other, communicating with the quirk of eyebrows and the angle of their heads. At length Sera shrugged and spoke up for the rest of them. "It's all yours, Boss."

Bile surged up his throat—that title didn't belong to him—but Squalo fought it down. "Damn straight. Squad leaders, I want you back in the mission room in an hour. The rest of you, stay inside or don't get caught sneaking out. Now get the fuck out of my way." He had to get his side stitched up before he bled too much more.

They all moved out of his way and a surge of conversation rose up

behind him—the sound of sixty-odd assassins all trying to get caught up on the latest news at once—but that wasn't anything to waste time thinking about, so Squalo didn't.

Lussuria fell into step with him. "I trust you realize that that's not going to be the end of it with her."

Squalo looked at the way Lussuria slouched along with him. "Yeah, and?"

"Nothing, really." Lussuria shrugged. "Just making sure you're on your guard is all."

There probably was more to it than that—Lussuria generally confined his unsolicited advice to matters of fashion—but Squalo was in no mood to bother with figuring out what it might be. He grunted and stomped along to the infirmary. Lussuria kept pace with him and didn't say anything else.

Bastone had plenty of say to make up for his silence, though. "Well, isn't *this* exciting," she intoned, shining a penlight into his eyes and prodding at his shoulder. "Another round of concussions, broken bones, and knife wounds." Huh. Maybe the bolas had hit harder than he'd thought. At the end of her exam, she folded her arms and frowned at him. "I suppose that if I tell you to take it easy for a few days, you'll just ignore me." She didn't bother waiting for a reply and crooked her finger at Lussuria, who'd followed Squalo all the way into the exam room. "All right, you unnatural freak, make yourself useful."

Lussuria grinned at her. "Why couldn't you have been a pretty boy, Doc?" he asked as he unfolded himself from his slouch and called his own Flame—Sun affinity. Right. "Your sweet nothings just turn my head. I don't even know what to do with myself."

Bastone rolled her eyes, unimpressed, and said something. Squalo lost track of it as Lussuria laid burning hands on him and his body's normal healing processes slammed into overdrive. His arm ached in three distinct places and his head swam; he clutched the edge of the exam table and felt the metal of it begin to buckle under his left hand as he did his best to ride it out. Bastone swooped in again the moment Lussuria lifted his hands away and began poking and prodding at Squalo as he gulped for breath, every centimeter of his skin clammy with sweat. Finally she grunted. "It's unnatural, but I suppose you'll do. Get out of my infirmary."

"That's what I like about you," Lussuria said, gazing at her like a

lovesick puppy. "Your tender bedside manner overwhelms me."

"Go *away*," she said as Squalo slid off the table, refusing to let his knees buckle, and did up what remained of his shirt.

The sigh Lussuria heaved might have come up from his toes, but he went with Squalo as he stalked back out of the exam room. Two of Cavilo's people had dragged her down to the infirmary; one of them was a Sun herself, which was good. Bastone didn't like cheating, but Squalo didn't need to be down a squad leader just then.

Cavilo showed her teeth as he passed; Squalo bared his in return and kept going. Lussuria heaved another sigh as the infirmary's doors closed behind them. "You two are so *charmingly* primeval. Would you like to mark your territory next, glorious leader? I'm sure we can find something for you to piss on."

Squalo transferred his snarl to Lussuria, who smiled back perfectly cheerfully and stuck close. After a moment, Lussuria added, "You've got plenty of time to grab a shower before that hour's up, by the way. You should go do that before you start to stink."

"Fuck you," Squalo told him.

Lussuria's sunglasses couldn't conceal his eye roll. "Hell, no. I like my balls right where they are, thanks." He shoved at Squalo's shoulder, the gesture nearly companionable. "Go. You'll make a better impression as a leader if you wear a uniform that's all in one piece and don't look like you've just gone through the wars."

Squalo growled at him, which had no discernable effect on Lussuria whatsoever. "You're not going to shut up until I go, are you?"

"Of course not. You're offending my delicate sensibilities."

Squalo sighed and went, which was easier than having to put up with Lussuria's nagging, and was okay until he closed the door to his quarters, turned around, and realized that their staff hadn't been in to clean yet. The bed was still a mess and his shirt was still in the middle of the floor where Xanxus had dropped it, and the hair dangle she hadn't bothered with when dressing that morning was still sitting on the bedside table next to the glasses they'd been drinking out of the night before, and she was gone and he'd let it happen—

His world went grey around the edges; Squalo forced himself to take a deep breath and let it out again, slow and careful. And another—and

another—until he trusted himself to come away from the door. Xanxus was going to be back. She'd come back or he would hunt down the Vendicare and tear their prison apart stone by stone to get her out, if that was what it took, but the boss was going to be back. Once she was, he'd tell her about Cavilo's attempt at taking over and they'd discuss whether it was worth keeping her around or not, and everything would be fine.

Yeah.

Squalo went to duck himself under the shower, the movements feeling mechanical, disconnected from reality, and let the water beat down on his shoulders and swirl down the drain, rusty red and then pink and then clear. It didn't do much to rinse away the haze of his rage or the cold feeling at the pit of his stomach, but then, he hadn't really expected it to.

He dressed himself again on the same autopilot as he'd showered, and only faltered once, doing up his collar—he was going to have to find something to stand in for the little pin that the Varia's leader wore, to keep up appearances. Xanxus had been wearing it when they'd headed for the house; God only knew whether she still had it or not.

Well, fuck it. He'd taken that pin off Tyr's body and knew Tyr'd taken it from Lupo before him; let its absence now stand for the fact that the Varia's proper boss was absent, too.

There was something else he could do, too, to mark that.

Xanxus wore dangles in her hair more days than not, beads and feathers tucked into her hair like a natural extension. Squalo knew she had several of them that she swapped around based on some private whim, and she wouldn't miss the one she'd left on his bedside table while the Vendicare had her.

Neither would anyone else.

Decision made, he scooped the dangle up and spent the next few minutes figuring out the trick of fixing it into the short hair behind his ear, where it felt strange brushing against the skin of his throat, ticklish and distracting. Squalo left it right where it was and went to meet with his squad leaders.

It was time to figure out how they could get the boss home.

The one good thing about Cavilo's challenge, if there was such a thing, was that no one questioned it when he set Sera and the rest of third squad on the task of finding out where the Vendicare had taken the boss and how they were holding her. Sera accepted the assignment with a lazy dip of her head that did nothing to conceal the gleam in her eyes—she liked her challenges, after all, and nothing would be quite as much of a challenge as the Vendicare. No one had ever gone up against the Vendicare, far as Squalo knew.

Maybe that just meant that it was about time someone did.

He put Mammon and Calla on the job of figuring out who had framed the boss, because there wasn't anyone in the Varia better with the Mist than Mammon and because Calla thought strange and sideways about things. It made dealing with her disconcerting as fuck but also meant that sometimes she got at things no one else saw. Between the two of them, they ought to get right to the bottom of things, providing—

"Forgive me for asking, but just who is going to be paying for all this?" Mammon inquired, silky smooth, right on schedule.

"You let me worry about that. You'll get paid your usual rates," Squalo assured him. Hell, he'd go into hock up to his eyebrows if that was what it took, would empty out all his bank accounts and sell himself to the highest bidder if it came to it. Whatever it took, he'd make it work.

Mammon's gaze was hooded by his cowl, but Squalo got the sense that he was being given a long, measuring sort of look. "Just remember that I don't work on credit."

Squalo shrugged at him—it was pretty much an article of faith with the Varia that Mammon only worked for cash—and after a moment, Levi said, "What I don't get is why someone would frame the boss for killing the Tenth. I can't see any reason for it."

"Can't you?" Sera's smile was thin. "Think about it. Who benefits if Federico Vongola bites it?"

Squalo didn't really hear Levi's response because he was too busy cursing himself for not having put it together himself. Damn it, he'd been there to *see* the little toad's smug smile! "Mammon, Calla, you can probably focus on Enrico," he gritted out, once he was finished castigating himself, and cut across Sera's more patient attempts to lead Levi into that same conclusion.

Calla tilted her head to the side, the gesture birdlike. "Does he benefit from framing Xanxus?"

Squalo thought about the ugly things Enrico had said to her and the way he'd looked at his youngest brother, and nodded. "Yeah. He does."

Calla's gaze was dark and unblinking as she inclined her head.

"So what are the rest of us going to be doing, glorious leader?" Lussuria inquired.

"Business as usual." The main house wouldn't be able to keep them locked up for long, not with the Cetrulli still making nuisances of themselves and the Ruscitti and Barassi about to indulge themselves in another round of their perennial war. The Ninth would have needed the Varia for that, and the other Families surely wouldn't let an opening like the Vongola's heir dying get past them. "We'll take the contracts that get offered like usual, right up until it's time to do something else instead."

He couldn't help the way his lips peeled back as he thought about the shape of *something else*. Wouldn't have cared to, either, even if he could. "Any other questions?"

None of them, not even Calla, quite met his eyes. Squalo snorted and flipped a hand at them. "All right, dismissed. Go get busy."

They went, Mammon and Calla together, already talking, and Sera with a purposeful stride. Cavilo prowled out, no sign of what she might have been thinking on her face, and Levi followed after her, but Lussuria hung back as Squalo unfolded himself from his chair.

God, what did the man want now?

"You started planning for what happens when the Ninth figures out what's going on?" Lussuria asked as Squalo headed for Xanxus' office.

"I don't give a shit what the Ninth thinks," Squalo told him.

Lussuria clicked his tongue against his teeth. "Sloppy, sloppy." He followed Squalo right inside the door, all uninvited, and ignored the way Squalo glared at him. "You'd better think about it. You want the Varia to still be around after the dust settles, right? Just think about how annoyed the boss would be if it weren't."

Squalo went around Xanxus' desk and ran his hand over the back of

her chair, not willing to sit in it, not yet. "I don't recall asking you for your advice."

"No, of course you don't." Lussuria grinned at him, lazy and dangerous as a crocodile sunning itself. "You get it for free. All part of the service, you understand."

"What service?" Squalo stared hard at Lussuria, whose bright hair fell across his face as he leaned in the doorway, but couldn't see what angle the man was playing this time.

Lussuria's sigh was put-upon and long-suffering. "Someone has to watch your back, you idiot. You want to hold the Varia for the boss, that's fine, and you want to get her back, also fine. Xanxus is a hell of a boss and I'm glad to follow her. But she's not the Varia and I'm not going to stand back and let you run us off a cliff because she's *your* Varia." He rubbed long fingers over his chin. "So if you're the interim boss, I guess I'll be your interim right hand. Dirty job, but someone's got to do it."

It took him a moment to face that thought, but Squalo gritted his teeth, squared himself with it, and forced himself to accept it. "You are such an *asshole*," he managed once he'd done it, gripping the back of Xanxus' chair hard enough to make the leather creak. "Seriously."

"Takes one to know one." Lussuria grinned at him. "Might as well get used to it. I'm not going to let you run around unsupervised. Someone needs to be a responsible adult around here, and I figure I'm the best candidate for it."

Squalo opened his mouth to argue—on principle, if nothing else—and then realized that he didn't care enough to bother with it. "Fine. If you insist."

"I think I do." Lussuria pulled himself out of his slouch and nodded at the files scattered across the desk. Xanxus' desk. "Shall we get started?"

Squalo took a deep breath and pulled Xanxus' chair out, easing himself down into the seat. "Yeah."

Chapter 3

Sera was good; she had a report by the afternoon they buried Federico. She strolled into Xanxus' office and draped herself in the chair across from the desk. "Good news is that I know exactly where they're holding Xanxus," she announced without preamble. Squalo sat up, all of the Varia's budget issues forgotten in his eagerness for news of the boss. "Bad news is that they're holding her on their maximum security level. Guess she's already made a few stabs at breaking herself out and they've decided to take her seriously."

Squalo cursed, low and angry, because of course the boss *would*, wouldn't be able to do anything but. Probably hadn't been able to think straight enough to hold herself steady and wait for him to work. Hell, it was Xanxus: it was possible that she might not have even thought he was coming, given how he'd failed to keep them from laying hands on her and taking her away in the first place.

Sera waited him out until he'd gotten the cursing out of his system and was able to say, "Tell me about the maximum security level."

"It's where they keep the most dangerous offenders." Sera fell silent, the dark, pointed features of her face going still as she picked her words. "It's underground, four stories down at least. One access point in and out and no backdoors of any kind. Utilities, water, sewage, it all routes in and out through that centralized point, which is always watched. And..."

Whatever it was, it wasn't going to be good. "Just tell me," Squalo said. "It can't be any worse than what I'm imagining."

Sera dipped her chin, acknowledging the point. "They keep the prisoners on that level sedated. They keep them in tanks, chained up just in case one of them wakes up, and that's... they just leave them there until old age gets them." She looked away from him, mouth closed tight enough that she looked like a woman trying not to be sick.

Squalo understood the impulse as his imagination filled in the outlines of the picture—Xanxus, suspended in a tank, all the restless energy of her quenched and still.

He exhaled, careful lest the jagged edges of his breath cut him open. "Okay. How do we get her out of there?"

Sera looked unhappy, which was not a good sign at all. "Prisoners only go in or out based on orders from the head of the Vendicare, and who that is—your guess is as good as mine. Sometimes a prisoner is released, but that almost never happens and we haven't figured out when and why it does. I don't think it's *ever* happened to one of the prisoners on that level." She paused. "And... no one's ever escaped. Ever."

Squalo forced himself to breath, in and out, until he trusted his voice again. "Fuck." He raked his hand through his hair, sliding it over the softness of feathers, and shook the moment of paralysis off. If no one had ever done it, then they would be the first. Why not, when Xanxus was so exceptional on every other front? "Okay. Keep working on it. There has to be a way." He wasn't going to accept any other alternative.

Sera's expression was blank—too blank—but she let out a breath and nodded. "We're working on it. It's not going to be easy, though. I don't think we have the force to do it ourselves, not on a frontal assault. There might be a way of sneaking in, though no one knows enough about the Vendicare to figure out how..." She spread her fingers through the air, describing an uncertain arc. "Not an easy job."

"If it were easy, it wouldn't need Varia quality to pull it off." That tugged a sharp little smile out of her. "Anything else?"

"Not yet." She pushed herself out of her seat. She carried it easily, but there was fatigue in the movement of her body. "Let you know when there is."

"I'll be waiting."

Sera tipped him a jaunty salute and went out, leaving Squalo to his thoughts and the budget. He sat silently, thinking about tanks of prisoners buried deep in the earth, before he managed to shove the thought aside and force his attention back to the task at hand.

The Ninth left them on what he must have thought of as house arrest for the next few days, which Squalo would have found amusing in other circumstances. That the Ninth thought he had the people to keep the full force of the Varia pinned down in their own damn fortress—that he thought that there was any way a building full of assassins would let anyone not of their number know all the ways in and out of their own headquarters—spoke volumes. But that was fine; better to be underestimated by an opponent than not.

Besides, it gave them room to work in.

But the Varia did report directly to the Ninth, which meant regular meetings at the house and that the Ninth couldn't keep them mured up forever. He sent for Squalo a few days after the funeral, and Squalo could have almost been glad of the summons—Sera hadn't made much more progress, and neither Mammon nor Calla were having any luck in finding the evidence to pin Federico's murder on Enrico. Would have been grateful, if circumstances had been different.

It was still almost worth it to stride into the Ninth's office, Lussuria at his heels, and be greeted with Enrico's sputtering outrage. "What are *you* doing here?" he demanded, pointing a shaking finger at Squalo.

"Head of the Varia meets with the head of the Vongola." Squalo kept his tone bored, though he itched to feed that finger back to Enrico the hard way. "What do you *think* I'm doing here?"

It was more interesting to catalogue the people in the room—Staffieri and Martelli, as usual, both of them with the sort of lingering contusions that corroborated the gossip Calla had brought back about how strenuously Xanxus had resisted being handed over to the Vendicare. The Ninth, of course, tired and old. None of Federico's people; what happened to defunct guardians, anyway? The old man's outside advisor, Sawada—that was a strange addition to the usual mix—and Enrico, plus his secretary: a thin, tweedy sort of fellow who gave Squalo and Lussuria distinctly nervous looks that he probably thought were hidden behind the round lenses of his glasses.

So Enrico hadn't wasted any time asserting his place as the Ninth's probable heir, had he? And he was puffing up, outraged as only a man insecure in his position could. "*You're* the head of the Varia? That's absurd—Father, he tried to kill me, and he was probably in it up to his neck when she killed Federico. How can he still be the head of the Varia? Why haven't you made him step down?"

Rage was so familiar a companion at this point that catching it before it slipped free and drove him to doing something intemperate was almost easy. Squalo bared his teeth at Enrico and saw him quail as the Ninth sighed and Staffieri looked pained.

"*Make* him step down?" Lussuria sounded amused. Squalo shifted himself aside so that he'd be clear if Lussuria decided to move. "Little man, you don't know anything, do you? We're the *independent* assassination unit. We choose and follow our own bosses, and we

choose on merit, not blood." He looked Enrico up and down. "Not that you'd know much about that, I guess."

First Enrico went white. Then he went red, and his voice nearly broke as he said, "How *dare* you, you—"

"Enrico." The Ninth's voice was quiet but sharp, and his son cut himself off. "That will be enough. Please do not alienate the head of the Varia or his right hand." His glance slid to Squalo's face and rested on the feathers and beads dangling behind his ear. "We need all the unity we can lay hands on just now."

Enrico's face went a darker shade of red, but he shut up, so Squalo supposed that counted for something. He showed the bastard his teeth and dropped himself into the seat Xanxus had normally claimed for herself, hooking a knee over the arm. "What do you have for us, old man?" Might as well finish making it clear where they stood, just in case the Ninth and his people had any doubts on that score. He didn't suppose there could be many of those left at this point, which was just the way he wanted it.

He watched them from behind a purposefully bored expression. The Ninth and other geezers' mouths tightened, but none of them said anything. Sawada's brows furrowed just a bit, thoughtful, and Enrico was obviously furious. His secretary—what *was* his name? Squalo had seen him following Enrico for months now, and couldn't recall it for the life of him—just looked plain scared. Squalo filed all that away to think about later as the Ninth cleared his throat. "I assume that you *have* resumed complete control of the Varia, of course?" Squalo inclined his head a fraction. "Very good. We have a number of jobs that will require some fairly personal attention on your part, I'm afraid."

They wanted to keep him busy, then. Squalo failed to be surprised by that, but it wasn't any skin off his nose if they didn't realize he knew how to delegate. "Well, stop wasting my time and tell me what they are."

The Ninth gave him a long look. "In a moment. There is something else we must do first." He smoothed a hand over the papers lying on the desk before him; the ring on his finger caught the sunlight and winked in it.

Oh, he *wouldn't*.

But it was the Ninth. Of course he would. He looked at Squalo and

raised his eyebrows. "Does the Varia serve the Vongola?"

Damn that shitty old man. Squalo stared at him, trying not to let the grinding of his teeth turn audible. "Yes," he said, "Of course it does."

The Ninth looked at him, utterly dispassionate, utterly unmovable for all the new lines sorrow had carved into his face. "I will have your word on that."

And if he didn't give it, would he make it out of the building alive? He had Lussuria with him, so maybe. But that wouldn't do the boss any good.

Xanxus.

Squalo grinned at the old man, seeing a way through this. "I serve the Vongola blood, heart and body and soul. I will not be forsworn." Did the Ninth know that Federico had visited Xanxus? Did he know what Federico had told her?

Apparently not; the old man's eyes narrowed, but he did not object to the oath. He stood and extended his hand to Squalo. "Very well."

Oh, he was going to regret doing that, one day. Squalo promised himself that and pushed himself up to plant a perfunctory kiss on the Vongola ring. "Are we done now?" he inquired once he'd resumed his seat. "Or do you have some other hoop you want me to jump through, old man?"

"No one is as impatient as the young," Sawada murmured as the Ninth settled back into his seat. When Squalo glanced at him, the sharpness of the man's eyes worried him a bit. He'd never had much to do with the outside advisor, but knew he was considered a man to reckon with, and it was just possible he'd seen through that little act.

"Better impatient than complacent," Lussuria drawled. "But maybe we could get on with things? Pointing the boss at something he can go ahead and kill will make all our lives easier."

Squalo kept his reaction to being called the boss off his face—it wouldn't do to undermine the point Lussuria had made—but part of him wanted to protest it anyway.

He stifled it with an ease that was starting to become practiced.

The Ninth sighed. "To business, then."

Lussuria didn't say anything until they were just about back to headquarters. "So. You got a frequent flyer account? You could get some good use out of it if you do."

"I'll look into it." The Ninth had shoved a whole stack of jobs at him, a smash and intimidate job in Venice, another in Campania, a hit in Rome, another in Munich, a contract for the Cavallone that would take him to London, and a job in fucking *Japan* of all places—"I get the feeling that I'm supposed to be keeping myself busy." All of those jobs were supposed to need the careful, delicate touch of the head of the Varia, of course, though Squalo had his doubts on that score.

"Does he not know the meaning of the word *delegation*, maybe?" Lussuria wondered. "Or does he think that *you* don't know?"

"Beats the fuck out of me." But then, the Ninth seemed to believe that they'd all stayed at home like tame little assassins, too, so maybe. Had the man always been so oblivious, or had senility set in without anyone else having noticed? He slanted a glance at Lussuria. "You'll keep things going while I'm gone, right?"

Wasn't really a question, of course. Lussuria grinned at him, crooked. "Sure thing. Keep you updated if anything comes up." He rubbed his chin, wearing a complacent grin. "I'm pretty good at this right hand thing, aren't I?"

Squalo didn't bother commenting on that. "Whatever. I've got to pack for Venice."

At least there was one good thing about all these jobs the Ninth had dumped in his lap: it was going to keep the money rolling in and Mammon happy.

Several weeks later, Squalo was cleaning the last of the blood from his sword in some piddling little town in Japan when Sawada turned up out of nowhere to greet him with a casual, "Yo!" as he stepped around the pools of blood spreading across the concrete floor.

"The fuck," Squalo replied, because he'd flown out economy class and his temper had not even sort of begun to recover from that, or the fact that he'd been from pillar to post killing people to keep the Ninth happy. "What the fuck do you want?"

Sawada fixed a look on him that was guileless as a puppy's. "Oh! I just

happened to be in the area and thought you might like to see a familiar face while you were here."

What, was the Ninth checking up on him now? "Not particularly," Squalo told him, sheathing his sword and walking away from the bodies. As he did, a horrible thought occurred to him: this was the last of the busywork the Ninth had assigned him. He glared at Sawada. "Are you here from the Ninth?" Was the shitty old man even going to give him a chance to fly home and check in before sending him on another whirlwind set of jobs?

Sawada just laughed. "No, no! I'm just here to visit my wife and kid, honest." He smiled at Squalo, though it didn't quite hit his eyes. "Let me buy you dinner. I know where we can get the best sushi in Japan." Just when it was on the tip of Squalo's tongue to refuse, he added, "And I'll even make it worth your while."

The man was head of CEDEF; what "worth his while" meant could be anything. Squalo measured that against the sober look in Sawada's eyes and the knowledge of whom the man worked for, and decided it was worth the chance. "Fine."

"Splendid! Come with me, then." Sawada gestured him along and led him through the streets of the little town—Namimori, that was what it was called—and kept up a steady stream of chatter about the local landmarks the whole way. Squalo tuned him out after the first five minutes and occupied himself by calculating how long it would take to get home and what progress his people might have made on their assignments since his last check-in—probably precious little—until Sawada turned in at a little sushi shop that looked like it could have come straight out of the movies. The guy standing behind the counter greeted Sawada like a long-lost friend. "Temitsu! I didn't know you were in town! Come in, come in!"

Sawada grinned back at him and ushered Squalo to the chairs at the counter. "Well, you know how it goes. Gotta make sure Nana doesn't forget my face."

The sushi chef just shook his head as he passed a pair of hot, damp towels to them. "It's not good for a man to be so much away from his family. If you're not careful, Nana-san will realize that you never were good enough for her and she'll run off. And *then* where will you be?"

"Right where I deserve, I suppose." Sawada shrugged, scrubbing his hands clean. "Business is a harsh mistress, Tsuyoshi."

"That it is, that it is." The man, Tsuyoshi, poured two cups of tea for them and fixed his gaze on Squalo. "And who's your young Varia friend?"

Squalo kept his expression blank, but only at the expense of biting down on his tongue. "Who wants to know?"

"Easy, there." Sawada's eyes twinkled a bit. "This is Yamamoto Tsuyoshi. He used to be my senpai until he retired. Tsuyoshi, this is Squalo."

Yamamoto raised expressive eyebrows. "The new Sword Emperor." He fixed a sharp eye on Sawada even as he began assembling things on the counter behind the glass. "Just what are you up to now, you young rascal?"

Squalo wanted to know the same thing himself. A retired CEDEF agent? Really? Who knew enough of him to call him by his title?

Something was going on here. No surprise on that, but nice to have it confirmed.

"Nothing... well, nothing much," Sawada amended himself, rubbing the back of his neck. "Seemed like this might be a good place to talk, though."

Yamamoto snorted. "Seems to me that you're unclear on the subject of *retired*."

"Well, guess there's nothing for it, then. C'mon, kid." Sawada pushed his chair back. "We're going to have to get our sushi somewhere else." He scratched the stubble on his chin. "Think there's a combini on the corner..."

Yamamoto rolled his eyes. "Sit down, you idiot. I'm just a sushi chef. I'm not responsible for what people talk about when they're in my restaurant, am I?"

"That would be completely unreasonable." Sawada pulled his chair up again and the two of them shared grins of perfect accord.

Squalo found his voice. "*Kid*?" he objected.

Sawada grinned at him, so clearly amused that Squalo's fingers itched to slap the laughter off his face. "Oh, yeah. Definitely. Speaking of..." He turned back to Yamamoto. "How's that boy of yours doing?"

Yamamoto lit up, his grin spreading from ear to ear. "Growing like a weed. Looks like he's taken a shine to baseball."

Sawada perked up. "No kidding. He any good?"

"He's eight," Yamamoto said, pointed. Sawada simply raised his eyebrows and Yamamoto relented, beaming. "He's not bad. His coach seems to think he's got some real potential."

"Well, isn't that a fine thing?" Sawada looked pleased, at least until Yamamoto tipped his head to the side and asked, "And how's young Tsunayoshi?"

Sawada lifted an equivocal, rueful shoulder. "About the same as ever, really."

"It takes some longer than others." Yamamoto's voice was sympathetic. "He'll find his way one of these days."

"That's what Nana and I keep telling ourselves." Sawada sighed and peered into the depths of his tea, apparently plumbing their depths for secret knowledge.

Squalo lost what little patience he had left. "Is there a reason I'm here?" he demanded.

"That's the kind of question you really ought to be asking a priest, kid," Sawada replied. "I don't deal in philosophy, myself. Never had the brains for it."

Yamamoto snickered from behind the counter, hands moving swiftly to slice a roll of sushi and arrange the pieces on a small porcelain plate. "Here." He passed the plate over the counter to Squalo. "You'll have to forgive us. We like to take the scenic route."

Squalo growled, not particularly placated by the offering. "Unless you're going to get to the point, I'm leaving. I got places to be and things to do." A flight back home and he might be able to get a day or two to try and figure out the Vendicare problem for himself. Two months now and Sera still hadn't come up with anything. The thought made his throat close up like someone had their fingers wrapped around it and was squeezing.

"I know I was that young once," Sawada mused. "But surely I was never that impatient."

"No," Yamamoto said, already shaping another roll. "You were worse." He glanced at Squalo, his eyes kind, and added, "Have a little mercy on the boy before he explodes."

"You spoil all my fun." Sawada wrapped his hands around his tea and flipped some internal switch. The casual, grinning slacker disappeared and the Ninth's outside advisor sat in his place. "You're retired. Did you hear about Federico?"

Yamamoto's hands went still on the knife he held. "I heard." His eyes were sober. "It's a hell of a thing." He gazed at the fish and rice on the counter in front of him for a long, motionless moment before he resumed his work. "He always seemed like a good boy. Would have made a good Tenth, I thought."

"Thought so myself." Which of course he would have; he'd approved the choice formally as the outside advisor.

Yamamoto's eyes flicked up, looking Squalo's way. His tone was almost casual. "I heard the daughter did it."

Squalo gritted his teeth; two months hadn't made keeping silent while the rest of the Family lied any easier.

Sawada took a drink of his tea. "You ever known a member of the Varia not to claim a kill if they were called on it?"

Yamamoto thought it over. "Can't say as I have. They might try to cover their tracks so no one knows how they did it, but generally they're overjoyed to claim credit for having done it. Arrogance, of course, but then—Varia." He tossed a faint smile Squalo's way. "You lot are a bit predictable that way."

Squalo glared at them both impartially, waiting for them to get to their point, whatever it was.

"They are, aren't they?" Sawada's smile was rueful. "And that's the peculiar thing." He raised his eyebrows and glanced Squalo's way. "Xanxus was the head of the Varia, but she and her right hand insisted that she hadn't done it. Isn't that strange?"

"It's one thing to kill someone on a job, and another to kill the future boss of the Family," Yamamoto pointed out, tones utterly reasonable. "A sense of self-preservation suggests that *not* claiming the kill in those circumstances would be the prudent thing to do."

"Yes, but." Sawada slid another of those sharp-eyed glances Squalo's way. "You going to eat that, kid?" He reached over and swiped a piece of sushi off Squalo's plate without waiting for a response. He popped it into his mouth and carried on, indistinct around the mouthful. "So the story goes like this. Xanxus asks Federico for a meeting. He goes, along with his right hand. She incapacitates Fedele and kills Federico and then walks away. Four hours later, she denies having done any such thing. Swears she was with her right hand the whole time and he corroborates the story, but Fedele was very clear that it was her."

"It *wasn't*," Squalo growled, no longer able to contain himself. "She didn't do it!"

Sawada mouthed, "He's the right hand," to Yamamoto, exaggerating each word and pointing at Squalo.

Yamamoto ignored them both and stared into the space over their heads, expression abstracted. "The head of the Varia left a witness alive?" he repeated, as though he weren't sure he'd heard correctly. "Are you joking?"

"Someone's joking." Sawada shrugged. "But not me."

Wait. Wait, *what*? Squalo stared at the man. "You—you don't think she did it?" Was he *serious*? If this was just another one of his jokes, the Ninth was about to be short one outside advisor.

"It's my job to provide an outside perspective." Sawada stole another piece of sushi off his plate. "And from my perspective, that story doesn't work. It's too tidy. And too strange."

The emotion that gripped Squalo was too complicated to have a single name as it squeezed his chest. "Then you've got to say something to the Ninth! You've got to make him see!" In his urgency, he came close to grabbing Sawada's shoulder and shaking him. "You've got to—"

"Easy, kid." Sawada looked tired, suddenly. "It's not that simple. The Ninth doesn't want to hear it. He lost his son and he has a convenient way of understanding why it happened. Getting him to question that means he might have to look at a less comfortable explanation."

"Means owning up to having been wrong, too," Yamamoto added. "Ninth never was much for that, as I recall. Speaking of pride."

"But she didn't do it," Squalo repeated, though he didn't know why he was surprised. Or disappointed. God knew her Family never had taken

her part, not when it wasn't convenient for them to do so. "The Vendicare have had her for two months now."

Yamamoto passed Sawada his own plate of sushi. "The Vendicare? Then she's not dead. That's good."

"You figured out how to break her out yet?" Sawada asked, casual as a day at the beach. He grinned at the startled sound Squalo made.

"Please. If you *weren't* working on that, *that* would have surprised me."

Squalo froze, caught between the need to talk to someone who seemed to believe Xanxus' innocence and the fact that Sawada was the Ninth's outside advisor. "They have her on the maximum security level," he said after a moment's indecision. That was neither confirmation nor denial. Not exactly.

"No, then." Sawada attacked his sushi, looking thoughtful. "Well, it's not going to be easy, I can tell you that much."

Not going to be—did they really think he gave a flying fuck about how *easy* it was going to be? Squalo opened his mouth to correct that monumental misapprehension and Yamamoto said, thoughtful, "Seems to me that the only time I ever heard of someone getting off that level was when they were being released. Scarapetti, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, there's that," Sawada agreed, "but then, I'd keep it quiet if anyone had ever escaped from my inescapable prison. Or if I had escaped. Seems like the smart thing to do, right?"

"You would?" Yamamoto fixed an extremely skeptical look on Sawada. "Really."

"Hypothetically speaking, I would. I mean. If I were the kind of person who'd let myself get caught doing something the Vendicare had me in for." Sawada picked the last piece of sushi off his plate, popped it into his mouth, and added, "Well, probably I would."

"I expect that Scarapetti makes for a better example," Yamamoto said. He leaned against the counter and glanced Squalo's way. "You know that one?" Squalo shook his head, no, bewildered by these two and their idle-but-not banter and the fact that they were maybe sort of on the boss' side. "Didn't think so. It was probably before your time."

"Long story short, Scarapetti killed a bunch of the Modigliani and the Modigliani gave him to the Vendicare to hold onto while they argued over how they wanted to kill him. Took 'em a while to hash it out, but

their boss finally sent word to the Vendicare once they had and the Vendicare gave him back up again." Sawada hummed between his teeth. "Wasn't there a bribe involved, too? I mean—Vendicare."

"Probably." Yamamoto rubbed his chin. "Modigliani is Lightning, though. You'll need a Sky Flame to seal the letter if you want a Vongola prisoner released. Not too many of those running around."

"True," Sawada said. "Guess that wouldn't work. Well, makes for a nice hypothetical, anyway. Not like either of us is going to be breaking someone out of the Vendicare's holding tanks." He stole another piece of sushi off Squalo's plate and ignored the way Squalo was gaping at him.

"Precisely." Yamamoto smiled at Squalo. "Amazing what kind of nonsense people will talk about over a meal, isn't it?"

Squalo nodded, speechless, because he didn't know what else to do—had they *really* just handed him a way to get Xanxus out, just like that?

"Oh, right!" Sawada clapped a hand to his forehead. "There *was* something I wanted to talk to you about, wasn't there?" He reached inside his jacket and took out a photograph. He set it on the counter and slid it to Squalo with his fingertips. "What do you make of this fellow, kid?"

Squalo stared at the photograph, not recognizing the man in it right away, though he did feel the tug of recognition at the round glasses, the thin face and vaguely scholarly look—no, wait. "That's... Enrico's secretary, isn't it?" Enrico's secretary, who was... what *was* his name? Squalo tried to recall it and found his mind sliding away from the subject like fingers sliding off the slick curve of wet glass. "The fuck. What *is* his name?"

Sawada grunted; the sound was both annoyed and pleased. "Thought so." He tapped his index finger against the photograph. "That's Matteo Salvatore."

Matteo Salvatore. Squalo felt the slick curves of the name trying to slide through his fingers again and growled, refusing to let it. He was the goddamn Sword Emperor *and* the interim head of the Varia and he was *not* going to put up with this—this—whatever the hell this shit was.

The photograph wavered in his vision, turning fuzzy, then sharpened

all at once—that was Matteo Salvatore, Enrico's secretary and presumptive right hand, who had been there the morning Xanxus had stormed away from breakfast and when Enrico had accused her of killing Federico and when the Ninth had demanded Squalo's oath of loyalty—had been there for all of it, hanging back and wearing the same small, satisfied smile throughout.

And Squalo hadn't paid him any mind at all till now. What the *fuck*?

"One of the things that the outside advisor has to do is be able to see things as they are, and only as they are." Sawada's voice was quiet. "There's a trick to doing it, which is a trade secret, but that's neither here nor there. Because whatever the hell is going on with my Family, this fellow is part of it. Maybe the root of it, even."

Squalo looked up from the photograph. "Is he Mist?"

Sawada's expression was grim. "He seems to be. That's the ring he's set to hold." At Squalo's look, he nodded. "They're pushing for a confirmation of Enrico's position as Vongola Decimo. Enrico's scraped together some guardians and I don't like it. I don't like any of it. Enrico isn't the one who should lead the Family."

The sound Yamamoto made behind the counter was sharp. "You're going to—"

Sawada looked up at him, mouth set and unhappy. "I don't think I have a choice. This is all wrong. And you haven't been there—if Enrico takes this Family, there'll be nothing to left to set the Vongola apart from any other Family. Nothing. Enrico doesn't see the importance of those things. All he sees is the power." He glanced at the photograph. "Especially now that he listens to Salvatore and follows Salvatore's advice."

Squalo sucked in a breath, realization hitting him. "If he's a Mist... fuck, if he's a Mist, Mammon hasn't picked up on him." And Mammon was—well, they all knew who Mammon was, *what* he was, even if he was keeping that quiet for reasons known only to himself.

"Mammon hasn't—ah. Yes. Mammon." Sawada went silent, then swore, low and vicious, the words cutting through the air like bullets.

Yamamoto turned away from them and silently retrieved a bottle from the shelf, along with three shallow drinking bowls that he filled and passed out. Sawada tossed his back like it was water; Squalo tasted his more cautiously and grunted at the kick of it.

"It's going to have to be a battle between heirs, then," Yamamoto said after he'd drained his own.

Squalo snorted. "Good luck with *that*. Massimo doesn't stand a chance against Enrico."

They both looked at him, and he thought they might have been disappointed. He drained off the alcohol—it tasted of fruit and fire—and stared back at them both. "Well, it's not like you're going to get *Xanxus* to do it." No one had ever taken her that seriously.

"Don't you think she would?" Sawada probably thought it was a reasonable question, too.

Squalo gave him a long look. "You know what she found out the day before Enrico killed Federico?" he asked. "She found out that the Ninth has been lying to her about being her father. What do *you* think?"

Sawada stared at him, then extended his cup to Yamamoto for a refill. "*Fuck*," he said after tossing it back. "Fuck, we told him...!" He raked a hand through the stubble of his hair, muttering under his breath.

Yamamoto was frowning. "So she has no attachment to the Family itself?"

Squalo opened his mouth to answer that and found that he didn't quite know what to say. "I..." Because she had been so *angry*, but... would she have been that angry if she hadn't cared, somewhere at the bottom of it? "I don't know."

Sawada raised his head. "Would she fight to keep the ring from going to Enrico?"

That he could answer. "Hell, yes." She'd do it for spite, if nothing else. He drummed his fingers against the countertop. "Couldn't I just kill him, though?" He wanted to leave it for the boss to do herself, but maybe they didn't have that kind of time.

Yamamoto shook his head, *no*. "Better to wait until there's an heir to take his place. Someone strong enough to hold the Family."

"Which Massimo isn't and Tsuna is too young for." Sawada caught Squalo's startlement and smiled, faint. "Straight from the First when he retired and remarried. We don't talk about it and mostly go into CEDEF to keep the line of succession clear. But desperate times call for desperate measures." He straightened his shoulders. "It'll have to be

Xanxus. We'll have to chance it. It'll give Tsuna a few more years, or Massimo's boys, maybe."

Squalo felt obliged to point something out. "The boss is still in prison. And hasn't actually agreed to any of this." Hell, he wasn't sure that *he* had agreed.

Sawada waved that away. "You'll get her out. Do you need help getting a Sky Flame to mark the letter to the Vendicare? Money? Or can you handle that yourself without drawing on CEDEF's resources?"

"It's the Family," Yamamoto said, not unkindly, when Squalo stared at him. "She's still Vongola, and at the heart of it, nothing matters beyond that, as long as she'll hold the Family and what it stands for together."

Squalo wasn't so sure about that, but—fuck, it was the best chance he'd had yet, and Xanxus could decide what she wanted to do about it after she was free again. "Tell me more about these resources," he said, and watched Sawada begin to smile.

Lussuria was on hand when Squalo slouched his way off the jet; he greeted Squalo with raised eyebrows over his sunglasses. "Something good happen in Japan?"

Huh. He'd felt kind of like he was moving with more purpose again, so it must have showed. "Maybe. Got some interesting ideas while I was there, anyway."

"Glad someone is finding inspiration." Lussuria grimaced when Squalo glanced at him. "No one's getting very far on those special jobs you set them, glorious leader."

Which wasn't any real change in how things had stood when he'd flown out. Squalo sucked a breath in through his teeth, then shrugged. "Doesn't matter now." When Lussuria glanced at him, curious, he added, "Told you. Got some new ideas."

Lussuria hummed, the sound interested, but saved his questions until they were in the relative privacy of the car. "What kind of ideas?"

"Ran into Sawada while I was in Japan. He's set on proposing an alternative candidate for the Tenth." Squalo leaned his head back against the seat and waited for Lussuria to put that together.

It only took a moment for the leather of Lussuria's gloves to creak as he gripped the steering wheel more tightly. "He is, huh?" Lussuria kept his voice calm and measured, but something like laughter bubbled underneath it. He grinned fiercely at the road unspooling ahead of them. "You don't say."

"Yeah. It was an interesting conversation."

Lussuria drove in silence for a few minutes, probably turning all that over inside his head. "So where's he going to get this alternative candidate from?"

"He's decided he wants to delegate that task to us, but he had a few ideas and suggestions for where we might look." Squalo glanced at Lussuria, sidelong. "The old man still looking for ways of keeping me busy?"

Lussuria frowned at the road. "He is, but unless there's something going on I don't know about, there's not anything going on that legitimately needs your attention. He's got jobs he can tap you for, but anyone could do them."

"Good. He tries to pull that shit again, I'll pull Lametti off fifth squad, pair him up with a Mist, and send him to do it." Lametti was good enough with a sword to make it work. "And I need to talk to Mammon." Either the little twerp hadn't managed to pin Matteo Salvatore for what he was, or he had elected not to, and if it was the latter, Squalo had some things he was going to say about that.

"Think we can manage that." Lussuria drummed his fingers against the wheel, staccato. "Better go ahead and warn you, though. Cavilo's been bouncing around like a kid waiting for Christmas since she heard you were coming back in."

Since it was Lussuria, Squalo didn't bother trying to stifle his groan as he rubbed his hand over his face. He didn't need to hear that. "Fuck. What's she up to now?"

"God only knows, but I thought you'd appreciate the heads-up."

Fucking *great*. Like he needed something else to worry about. Squalo gripped the bridge of his nose, took a deep breath, and added that to his list to deal with later. Not like it made any sense to try predicting Cavilo's plans and whims, since the only thing to rely on with her was that she was always out to improve things for herself. "Right," he said, once he'd resigned himself to *that* particular incipient headache. "What

else is going on?"

Not much, really, as it turned out, which was just as well. Squalo let Lussuria rattle off the updates on the squads and their jobs that had been too sensitive to deliver electronically and settled in for the rest of the drive, comfortable in the knowledge that Sawada was going to get a piece of parchment with a Sky Flame seal and that they both knew the names of some damn good forgers, and that he was that much closer to getting the boss back.

Mammon's cowl made it difficult to tell much from his expression, but Squalo thought he was looking wary when he came wandering into Xanxus' office and hopped up onto the chair. "You wanted to see me, Boss?"

"Yeah, I did." Squalo waited until Calla had come slipping in to join them and gotten herself settled. "How's that job going?"

Calla was the one to press her lips together, tight and prim, before saying, "He's remarkably difficult to pin anything to."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say he really didn't have anything to do with his brother's death." Mammon's voice was very even, but it didn't take a genius to hear the challenge in it.

"Maybe. Or maybe he's got a damn good Mist working for him." Squalo pulled his copy of that photograph of Salvatore and passed it across the desk for them to look at. "You two know who that is?"

No one lasted in the Varia for long without a strong will. Calla reacted first, hissing through her teeth. "Him," she said, low and tight. "I do know him. And his little *smile*."

That might have been enough to put paid to Salvatore right there; Calla was a Cloud right down to her fingertips and loathed anything that resembled an imposition on her will. If Salvatore had been fucking with her head, too, well. No wonder her eyes had gone cold like that.

Mammon stared at the photograph. "This isn't possible," he said, sounding distracted. "No one can—"

"Someone did." Squalo watched Mammon reach up to touch something that hung under his robe. "Which is probably how they killed Federico, and why we can't pin it on them." Could even have

something to do with the Ninth's apparent senility and how slow Squalo himself had been to react to the charges they'd laid on the boss that day, depending on how much Salvatore had been fucking with people's heads.

Calla's hands dropped to her knives, stroking over the pommels of them, thin brown fingers caressing them. "We can pin it on them now."

"Good." Squalo grinned at them both, knowing they'd see it for what it was. "Build up the case against them and hang onto it so we can drop it in the Ninth's lap when the time comes." And just let the Ninth try and wriggle out of that then. Maybe that would be even better than killing the old man—he talked so big about the honor and pride of the Vongola, so let him live with knowing what he'd done to his adopted daughter.

Well, presuming Xanxus didn't want them all dead.

Calla's nod was curt; Mammon's "Yeah. Yeah, okay" came out more slowly. His tiny fist was closed on something that Squalo couldn't see and he still seemed to be staring at the photograph.

Had to have been a shock, Squalo supposed, dismissing them to their tasks and watching him wander out, still wrapped in that air of puzzlement. When a person thought he was the best and someone else came along to prove that wrong... well. Maybe Mammon would take it as a growing experience.

He'd almost forgotten Lussuria's warning about Cavilo—who had shown up for the squad leaders' meeting and seemed like her normal rabid weasel self—by the time he had struggled through the last few hours of his day and its concomitant paperwork and thought it safe to stagger to bed to sleep off his jetlag. That, of course, was a mistake, and was why he was actually inside his quarters before he realized that Cavilo was sitting on his bed.

He was exhausted and preoccupied; that was his excuse for the seconds he spent staring at her like an idiot. "What the fuck," he managed eventually in the face of her little smirk. "What are *you* doing here?"

Only he had a feeling he knew what she thought she was doing, given the way her blouse was unbuttoned and she had a distinctly come-hither cast to her expression.

"What do you think I'm doing here?" Her voice was honey and whisky, all but a purr, and she lounged back against his pillows like they were her throne.

This couldn't seriously be happening, except that Squalo gave himself a surreptitious pinch and it actually seemed to be real. For fuck's sake. He would have rubbed his face, except that he didn't exactly trust Cavilo far enough to take his eyes off her for even a split second. "I think you've miscalculated." He folded his arms across his chest, ready to drop the blade out of his sleeve at a moment's notice. "I'm not interested, thanks. Now get out."

"Aren't you being just a little bit too hasty?" Cavilo crossed one leg over the other and smirked at him. "Think about it. You hook up with me and the Ninth will assume you've moved on and loosen that leash he's got around your neck. Give it enough time and you'll be able to get things done again."

Okay, he had to hand it to her: that was fairly clever. If she'd waited a little longer, or caught up with him before Sawada had, when he'd been starting to get desperate... he'd still have said *hell no*, but it would have been more difficult to do it.

Squalo gave her a moment to think he might have actually been thinking about it. Then he snorted. "Are you kidding? No way in hell am I going there. When the boss gets back, she's not going to have any reason to doubt *my* loyalty, thanks." More to the point, he wasn't going to give Cavilo any more chances to stick a knife in his back than he had to. He pointed at the door. "Now get the hell out of here so I can get some sleep."

The seductive smirk slipped off her face as she sat up. "Some day you're going to regret this," she promised him as she did up her blouse with nimble fingers.

"Not fucking likely." Squalo stood back, matching her glare for glare until she finally huffed and skulked the fuck out of his room. Once he'd locked the door after her and jammed his chair under the knob for good measure, *then* he permitted himself a short bark of laughter, because what else could he do?

He just hoped Xanxus would laugh, too, when he told her about this.

Squalo slouched lower in his seat, listening to the Ninth and his people talk the business in Campania over, not particularly interested

in their dithering. They'd gotten what they'd wanted, or thought they'd wanted—wasn't really his fault if the infighting they'd expected hadn't materialized after he'd introduced the former head of the Frentani to the edge of his sword. Could end up being something he'd have to care about, eventually, maybe, but for the time being, it was more interesting to watch the geezers interact with Enrico and his people.

Either Enrico had moved really fast after Federico's death, or he and that bastard Salvatore had been plotting for a while beforehand. Whichever it was, Enrico'd mustered a full complement of guardians out of the ranks of the underbosses. He had a clutch of them with him for this meeting. Squalo projected all the apathetic boredom in the world and studied them from behind its shield. Suretti, Enrico's would-be Storm, Squalo already knew. His elevation to potential guardian to the Tenth hadn't done much to calm him down; his was one of the loudest voices in favor of sending someone to kill some more of the Frentani. Capolino wasn't much better, either, for a Sun—he was just as aggressive and pushy as Suretti. Salvatore didn't say much himself, just sat back with a bland expression as the two of them backed Enrico's argument for a show of force against the Frentani while the Ninth argued against it just as vigorously, pointing out that doing so would be to invite a war.

"Let it happen!" Enrico swept a hand through the air. "The Frentani are nothing more than puppets for the Cetrulli anyway, and we've been dancing around them for too long. It's time we went ahead and put them in their proper places."

"At what cost?" the Ninth retorted. "The Cetrulli are allied with half our enemies and courting the other half. We might be able to crush the Cetrulli, but then we would have the Orsini and the Valetti howling for our blood and the Tomasso and the Macrini right behind them. We *might* survive the bloodbath, but what would we become in the process?"

Huh. Interesting. Squalo sunk lower in his seat as Enrico thrust his jaw forward. Dissension in the Family ranks already, and it sure looked like Enrico had gathered all the hotheads in the underbosses for his guardians. Maybe Sawada was right to be worried about letting Enrico take the Family.

"If we can't handle it, then what are we?" Enrico demanded. "How could we have let ourselves become so weak that we fear our enemies like this?"

And why, Squalo wondered, did that make Salvatore smile so? That was a damn good question, not that he was likely to get an answer to it. Not anytime soon.

The Ninth let Enrico go on a bit longer before cutting a hand through the air. "Enough. We are not going to send the Varia to kill still more of the Frentani. Frankly, I regret that we sent them in the first place. Spilling blood so rarely solves problems without causing a dozen new ones to spring up." He sighed and Staffieri stepped in to move them to the next order of business.

Also interesting, that. He hadn't been there when they'd hashed out the decision to send him to Campania, but right then he would have bet anything that it had been Enrico who'd come up with the idea to do it.

No wonder Sawada had his shorts in such a twist about getting Enrico out of the way. No one was ever going to call the boss temperate, but at least she wasn't *stupid* about strategy. Her first solution to any problem generally *was* a bullet, but only when she knew she could follow through afterwards. Enrico didn't seem to have much of a grip on long-term tactics—it almost seemed like he just assumed that everything would go the way he wanted it, just because he was Vongola.

If this did end up going to a trial of heirs, Xanxus was going to chew Enrico up and spit him out.

Squalo occupied himself with that pleasant thought, plus estimations of how long Capolino would last in a fight against Lussuria, until the old man had established that no, the Vongola wouldn't be starting any new wars this week. He accepted the assignments the Ninth parceled out with a grunt—Lussuria had been right, none of them actually needed the Sword Emperor to execute, despite the old man's lip service to the contrary—and stood when the Ninth dismissed them.

Enrico glared at the room impartially and stomped out with his people trailing after him, all of them but Salvatore looking just as pissed as their boss. Salvatore just looked blandly pleased with the universe, which was the most damning thing of all.

Before he and Lussuria could make their escape, too, the Ninth said, "A moment of your time, please."

Squalo schooled his face to bored disdain and turned back to the Ninth. "Yeah, what?" No sense in letting the Ninth think that they

were friends, after all.

The Ninth's mouth tightened infinitesimally beneath his mustache. "You had very little to say in our meeting today."

Squalo waited a beat and raised his eyebrows. "Wasn't aware that you were much interested in what I had to say."

The Ninth's expression didn't change. "The input of the Varia's boss is always valued in these meetings."

"I'll keep that in mind," Squalo said, though what he *wanted* to say was something else altogether. "Was there anything else?"

"This wasn't my fault, you know. I wasn't the one who made the choices that brought us to this place," the old man said, abrupt and harsh. "I'm not the one you should be angry with."

Squalo sank his teeth into his tongue rather than say anything he shouldn't—there were too many things to do to waste himself on the satisfaction of telling the Ninth exactly how wrong he was. "Was there anything else?" he repeated, once the taste of copper and iron had washed the need to scream out of his mouth.

The old man's mouth went even tighter, but he shook his head. "I suppose not."

Squalo jerked his head, the closest he could get to bowing, and went, Lussuria sticking almost as close as his shadow.

"I am going to enjoy making him eat those words," Squalo said, as conversationally as he could manage, once they were away from the house. "I really am."

Lussuria slanted a glance his way. "Yeah, I just bet you are."

Squalo permitted himself a moment to enjoy thinking about that, then shook it off. Once they had Xanxus back, they'd just see what the boss of the Varia had to say in those meetings. Until then, wasn't going to do him much good to keep dwelling on it.

Besides. He had a forger to meet and a job to commission.

Chapter 4

The forger Sawada had dug up—the best in the business according to CEDEF, which were not credentials to sneeze at—hadn't been much to look at. He'd given his name simply as Harper and had worn about three day's stubble and a shirt that had seen much better days, but his eyes had been sharp over the rim of his mug of tea, and had only turned sharper as Squalo explained precisely what sort of document he'd wanted forged. He'd set his mug down once Squalo had finished and smiled, slow and speculative. "You want me to forge orders from the Vongola." He'd all but sighed it. "This is the job I've been waiting for my whole career."

"Can you do it?" Squalo had asked him, not particularly inclined to be patient with someone else's raptures.

Harper had just smiled again, with enough whimsy to it that Squalo'd had some second thoughts about hiring him. "I suppose we'll have to find out, won't we?"

Which had been all fine and good when they were sitting in Xanxus' office talking the job over, but took on a different complexion now that Squalo was holding himself straight and calm behind Sawada's shoulder and feeling sweat trickling down his spine as the bandaged and shrouded Vendicare doorkeeper examined Harper's *pièce de résistance*. Harper had just pocketed his exorbitant fee and disappeared; he wasn't the one who'd have to deal with the fallout if the damn thing didn't pass Vendicare muster.

It was the bandages that were the worst part, the fucking bandages that wrapped around their fucking faces and turned every last one of them into anonymous, mummified menaces. It was no *wonder* that mothers in the mafia used the Vendicare to terrify their children into behaving.

The doorkeeper brought the letter closer to his face and Squalo fought to keep his face calm and his breathing steady. Then the man nodded, slow and ponderous. "Wait here," he said, and left them standing right there at the door.

Squalo had done a job once that had required him to stand perfectly still for two hours while he waited for his target to get done fucking her lover. He'd had to spend it behind a velvet curtain that hadn't been cleaned in a while, with dust tickling his nose and driving him

slowly insane with how badly he'd needed to sneeze and how absolutely imperative it was that he not.

Not fidgeting while he waited for the Vendicare, acutely conscious of how the path to the Vendicare's prison wound between two high cliff walls like the most perfect natural kill chute in the world, was infinitely harder than that job had been.

The stakes were a lot higher, too. Squalo gritted his teeth and held steady, wondering how Sawada could possibly seem so calm and unconcerned, and the minutes ticked by like separate eternities.

He couldn't help tensing when the ponderous doors of the prison began to creak open again, and his breath stilled in his throat when they had swung wide enough to let him see what was behind them. Two Vendicare stood in the doorway and they were holding Xanxus up between them. She was barefoot, wearing a pair of loose drawstring trousers and a white smock, and her hair hung in a damp tangle over her pale face. Her eyes were glazed and unfocused and her footsteps were unsteady as the Vendicare walked her forward.

She was slurring out curses and maledictions with every step.

"We release the prisoner Xanxus back into Vongola custody," the Vendicare on the left intoned, his voice sonorous behind his bandages. "Take her and go."

If that wasn't a subtle *and good riddance*, Squalo didn't know what was.

Sawada gestured at Squalo as Xanxus lifted her head and fixed her glazed stare on them, apparently having some trouble focusing on what was in front of her. "What the fucking fuck," she began as Squalo stepped forward and took her arm. He made a show of checking the rope that they'd used to secure her hands behind her back and bit down on his tongue to keep from hissing at how it was digging into her skin.

"As always, the Vongola respects and appreciates the efficiency of the Vendicare," Sawada said, smooth as butter. He turned and gestured again. "Come on, let's get this over with. Bring her."

It took everything Squalo had to close his hand on Xanxus' arm and frogmarch her back down the rocky path that was the only viable approach to the Vendicare's fortress-cum-prison. Xanxus had stopped swearing and stumbled along in silence; what he could see of her face looked more openly confused than he'd ever seen. She didn't say

anything at all until they'd stuffed her into the back seat of the car and Squalo had fitted himself in next to her. "What is this?"

Sawada slipped into the driver's seat; now that they were all safely behind dark-tinted glass, he was grinning like a little kid. "The first-ever successful breakout from the Vendicare's prison, I believe."

"The fuck." She went stiff as Squalo went for the ropes on her wrists, bypassing the knots altogether and sawing them free with his boot knife. Her wrists weren't *quite* raw beneath, but he hissed anyway at the sight, the anger that had been his constant companion for three months surging up again. "What—you're—fuck—"

"He's with us, Boss," Squalo told her. He glanced at the front seat as Sawada turned the key in the ignition, and qualified that statement. "Sort of, anyway."

Xanxus turned a glassy stare on him as Sawada put the car in gear and pulled away from the side of the road where they'd parked. "Squalo," she said, and then stopped, uncertainty playing over her face. "Is... is this really happening?"

Christ, whatever sedatives the Vendicare had been using on her must have been good ones. Squalo nodded. "Yeah, Boss. It's really happening." He reached for her hand and kissed the back of it. "I promise."

She stared at him a moment longer. "You always say that," she said, half to herself, and shook her head like she was trying to clear it. "I'm so tired."

"Sedatives," Sawada said; Squalo could see him glancing at their reflection in his rearview mirror. "They're probably going to take a little while to clear out of your system. It might be easiest if you slept it off. We're going to be driving for a while anyway."

"Yeah," Xanxus said after too long a moment. "Yeah. Okay." She looked back to Squalo and then sighed. "Might as well enjoy it while it lasts." She leaned herself against his shoulder, tucking her face against his throat. "Hold me," she commanded.

Squalo swallowed hard, something inside his chest twisting in response to that familiar command. "Sure thing, Boss." He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her against his chest, and felt her sigh. Sawada was still watching them from the rearview mirror; Squalo glared at him, just daring him to say anything.

Sawada was smart enough to be the head of CEDEF and the Vongola's outside advisor. He didn't say a word until Xanxus' breathing had changed, going deep and slow. "They're pushing for a confirmation by the end of the month. Think she'll be in fighting trim soon enough to stop that?"

"Assuming she decides to go along with that, probably." Squalo kept his voice quiet, matching Sawada's hushed tones, and stroked the damp strands of Xanxus' hair, smoothing them back from her face. "She'll do whatever she puts her mind to. But you're the one who has to talk her into it."

"Fair enough." What he could see of Sawada's expression looked indulgent. "Soon as she's had a chance to kick off those sedatives and figure out that this one isn't a dream, we can talk."

A—ah. Yes. A dream. The holding tanks and sedation. That made sense; he should have thought of that. Yeah. If he hadn't been so taken up with the fact that she was finally out and free, the way she belonged... well. Not that it mattered. She was here and the Vendicare had bought the fake letter from the Ninth saying that she was to be remanded into Vongola hands for execution and whatever else happened next, he was going to be right at her side where he belonged.

Squalo tightened his arms around Xanxus and Sawada drove on in silence.

They could have gone anywhere—even back to Varia headquarters—but Sawada was almost paranoid to be Varia himself, so they didn't. Sawada had made arrangements for them to occupy an isolated little house in the hinterlands that was usually rented out to tourists. Squalo suspected that he didn't want to know what kind of cover story Sawada had put together for them lest it annoy him into a rage on sheer principle.

The important part was that it was secluded, not a Vongola property, and would be a good place to hole up while the boss recovered.

It was late afternoon by the time Sawada had followed the long and winding drive up to the little house and killed the engine outside it. They looked at the place in mutual silence, Squalo sizing it up for the first time. The same grove of trees that had sheltered it from view from the long drive and the road was wrapped around the house itself, shading it, and extended beyond it, up into the hills that surrounded

the place.

After a moment, Sawada turned to him. "Been a long drive," he said. "Think I'm gonna take a walk and stretch out my legs a little."

If he'd tried to camouflage that as anything but what it was, Squalo would have been annoyed. As it was, all he could really manage was a mild exasperation with how much of a *sap* Sawada seemed to be. Christ, the man hadn't stopped sending smiling, doting glances at them once the entire drive.

Xanxus hadn't moved at all during the ride, but the slam of the car door roused her enough that she made a sleepy sound against his shoulder. Squalo stroked her hair. "Boss," he said, quiet. "Boss, we're here. There's probably a bed inside that'll be more comfortable for you."

She muttered against his shoulder, discontent and indistinct, and showed no signs of moving at first. Just when he was beginning to think he was going to need to try something else, he felt her body go tense against his. That was all the warning he got before she was pushing away from him, struggling to get free of his arms.

Squalo let go immediately, let her push herself back against the door on her side of the car. Her eyes were wild; she raked a searing glance around herself, taking in the car, the landscape, the house, and *him*. "What the fuck?" she demanded, voice hoarse and ragged. "What the fuck is going on?"

Squalo held himself very still, hands open and in plain sight. "The Vendicare had you, Boss. Sawada and I broke you out a few hours ago. This is... sort of a safe house where you can recover and decide what you want to do next."

Xanxus stared at him, and if she didn't look quite sane, at least the awful glassy look from before had burned away from her eyes. What was left behind was something Squalo hadn't seen for a long time, at least not when she was looking at him—wariness, distrust—and cut him to the bone. (But what else had he expected, when he'd been the one to let her be taken?) "You're working with Sawada?"

"I'd have worked with the devil himself to get you out of there, Boss." He couldn't blame her for being suspicious, though, given how closely Sawada normally worked with the Ninth. "He's having an argument with the Ninth right now, though. Sort of. He's got something he wants to get out of this, but you don't have to go along with it if you

don't want." Sawada was probably pragmatic enough that he'd even seen that possibility coming. "But he's not working on the Ninth's orders doing this, and neither am I. For whatever that's worth to you."

It was almost easy to fall into the careful, measured cadences of a formal status report. Maybe that was reassuring for her, too, because some of the tension eased out of her. "He wants something?"

Squalo nodded. "Yeah." Figured that knowing that would make this easier for her. "I think it's worth hearing him out. But it's up to you. You're the boss."

Xanxus' fingers flexed slowly, though her eyes never left his face. "Am I?" Her voice was soft, hovering on the edge of being very dangerous. "Am I the boss?"

They were still sitting in the back seat of the care, which made some things impossible. Squalo did the best he could with the space he had, folding himself into the best approximation of a bow he could manage. "Always, Boss," he whispered. "You'll always be my boss. I'll belong to you till the day I die. No matter what. Wherever you go, whatever you do, I'm yours and I'll follow you."

The seconds that ticked by after that seemed endless. Squalo barely breathed until he felt Xanxus' hand settle in his hair, the weight of it light. She didn't say anything, not right away, and then she threaded her fingers through his hair to touch the dangle he'd woven into it. "Is this...?"

"Didn't want anyone to make the mistake of forgetting who has my loyalty, Boss." Squalo closed his eyes as she stroked her fingers over the feathers and spun a bead on its cord. "And I needed something to hold onto that was yours."

Xanxus went quiet, her hand stilling against his hair. Squalo held his breath again until she said, "Still mine, then."

"Always, Boss." Her other hand was right there; he shifted far enough to kiss her knuckles. "I belong to you. I love you."

She exhaled; the sound shook and made Squalo, hearing it, ache inside. "And this... this really is real. This time it's not a dream?"

"No dream, Boss." Maybe, after they were done with Enrico and Salvatore and whatever she wanted to do with the shitty old man, maybe they could take the Vendicare apart, too. Might as well aim for

a clean sweep and make the world a better place while they were at it.

She didn't say anything else right away. Squalo waited her out, bent nearly double and wondering what he'd see if he were able to watch her face. Finally she eased her fingers away from his hair. "Okay. Let's get the fuck out of this car."

Squalo straightened himself up. "Sure thing, Boss." He glanced at the loose white cloth of her clothing. "Packed some clothes for you. Let me get the bags."

If they could treat this like everything was normal, maybe they'd be able to get through this okay. Maybe.

She was looking less like she was on the verge of burning the whole world down, anyway, so it seemed to be a workable strategy. She nodded and Squalo smiled back at her, tentative, before moving to unload the bags from the trunk and usher her inside.

Sawada stayed gone for a good three hours, which just showed that the man knew how to use the brains he had, even if he was a sap with a regrettable sense of humor. By the time he came wandering back in, Xanxus had prowled through the whole house, exploring it silently, and had demolished a substantial portion of the food in the kitchen. The uniform that Squalo had packed for her hung loose on her frame, so the food made sense; the way she had marked all the exits and then double- and triple-checked them worried Squalo.

She'd also demanded a full status report from Squalo and had shown no visible reaction to learning that the Vendicare had held her in their tanks for three months. She did snarl, once, when Squalo told her that Enrico was now the presumptive heir to the Vongola, and again when he sketched in Cavilo's attempts at moving herself up the Varia hierarchy. But that was all, and Squalo didn't know what that meant—whether she was saving up her rage or something else, something he was afraid to even think.

Sawada came in just before sunset, an amiable smile on his face, and found them sitting in the living room, talking. "Looks like the two of you have settled right in," he said, cheerfully ignoring the way Xanxus had gone tense and was glaring at him. "That's good. There anything we're going to need? I can give the caretakers a call and have them run up some more supplies if we need them."

"What do you want from me?" Xanxus' tone was flat, no inflection to

any of the words.

Sawada's smile didn't change. "Right to business, huh? Fair enough." He dropped himself into the nearest chair and switched gears as he did, turning sober. "Squalo has briefed you on where the Family stands? Good. In order to confirm Enrico as Tenth, the Ninth needs the approval of the outside advisor. I'm not going to give it to him."

Xanxus' expression as she stared at him didn't really change. "What's that to me?"

Sawada was good; if that dismayed him, he didn't let on. "I can't let Enrico have this Family." His voice and gaze were steady. "He doesn't understand the point of this Family, what Giotto built it to do and the legacy its bosses have guarded. All he cares about is the power being Tenth would give him and the fact that he's finally getting the respect he feels he's due. He's permitting a Mist user to cloud all our brains so he can get what he wants, which is *terrifying*. Who is this Mist user? What else has he slipped inside our heads? How does Enrico know that this fellow has our best interests at heart?" Sawada spread his hands. "The Family is in trouble. That's why it matters."

"So?" Xanxus' tone was still flat. "This is the same Family that just dropped me into prison and forgot about me, all for something I didn't even do. The same Family that's lied to me since it took me off the streets. It's not even *my* Family. So why the fuck do you think I care what happens to it?"

"It is your Family," Sawada said. "You come down through the Second's line, but you're Vongola." His expression was sympathetic. "Several of us told the Ninth that not telling you was a bad idea, but he felt that there was no need, and no harm in letting you assume that you were his child. He seemed to feel that it made up for all the things you'd been denied as a small child."

Her expression didn't even move. "Fuck that." That flat, expressionless tone was starting to really worry Squalo. Xanxus was *never* this calm without it being the prelude to a really *big* explosion. "So he felt sorry for me. Doesn't change what he did."

"No, it doesn't." Sawada leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "What if you thought about it like this? The one thing Enrico wants more than anything in this world is to be Tenth. I'm offering you a chance to deny him that. Not just deny it to him, take it yourself, if you like. If you don't, all you need to do is hold it for a few

years, until we can figure out which one of the kids will have the aptitude for it. That's all I ask."

Xanxus blinked, slow. "You're asking me to be Tenth." She betrayed the first hint of emotion then—incredulity. "You must be joking. That shitty old man would never allow it." Her lips stretched, curving into a bitter smirk. "It's not very ladylike, is it?"

"Doesn't much matter, is the thing." Sawada shrugged. "If I propose a candidate and he proposes a candidate, then what happens then is governed by tradition and protocol instead of personal whim. The two candidates and their guardians go through a trial to determine who should be heir. Winner takes the rings, the Vongola, and the loser serves." He paused, almost delicately. "If he survives."

Xanxus laughed, short and sharp. "Oh, no. You did *not* just tell me I could kill that fucker in this trial of yours and no one would blink at it."

"Actually, I think I rather did." Sawada lost any pretense of a smile he might have had and his eyes went hard. "He killed Federico, who had the potential to be one of the best bosses we've had in generations, all because he couldn't stand being passed over. He's not half the boss Federico would have been. He's not half the boss *you* are." He raised his eyebrows at the sharp look Xanxus gave him. "You're a good boss. The Varia are flourishing under your leadership. You take excellent care of whatever you've decided is yours. Why *shouldn't* I hope that you would be just as good for the Vongola as a whole?"

Xanxus' expression went stony. "Because the Vongola isn't mine. That's been made very clear to me."

"It could be," Sawada said. "If you wanted it to."

Xanxus gave Sawada a long look before she said, eyes never wavering from Sawada's face, "Squalo?"

Squalo took a deep breath to steady himself against the fact that she was still willing to ask for his input, still willing to let him tell her what was true and what wasn't, and his relief at that. "I'll follow you, Boss. Whatever you want to do." Best to get that established right up front. "You could do it. You're strong enough for it, and I can't think of a better way to rub that old man's face in what he's done. And people would follow you. You burn, Boss. Like a beacon." He took another breath, thinking over what he'd seen in the handful of meetings he'd sat in on. "And I don't want to live in a Family that would let Enrico

lead it. He's not smart enough, is the thing. He does stupid, aggressive things because they're easy or he sees the opportunity but not the cost. He doesn't think in the long term. He doesn't respect the individual parts of the Family or their traditions. For fuck's sake, he thought that the Ninth could tell the Varia who ought to lead it." He glanced at Sawada and sighed. "But that's all good for the Vongola. If you do this, there's not as much that'll be good for you. Maybe it's all intangible and I just can't see what you're going to get out of it, but it's probably going to be hard and thankless. But if you decide to do it, I'll back you all the way."

Sawada was smart enough to leave well enough alone and didn't try to add anything else, either to make his case or to dispute anything Squalo had just said. Xanxus didn't say anything in reply. After a moment she stood up and walked out of the room.

"Probably needs to think," Squalo said., trying not to fidget over the fact that she was out of his sight, when Sawada raised his eyebrows at that silent departure.

"There might be more rewards in it for her than you think," Sawada said, accepting that. "You didn't have to undersell it so hard."

Actually, he had, but Squalo didn't bother trying to explain that. Better to tell her the grim facts as they were than to paint them all golden and pretty and false. Which was something the Ninth need to learn. Probably would, too, one way or another.

Xanxus stayed gone for a while; darkness fell over the house and the moon rose before she came back. Sawada opened a bottle of wine while they waited; Squalo ignored the glass the man poured out for him and passed the time by pacing, trying not to be twitchy about where Xanxus was or how long she'd absented herself.

When she came back, her expression was set and grim. "What does this trial involve?" she asked, abrupt, offering no excuse for her absence and no preamble to her question.

"Fighting," Sawada said. "They're administered by the Cervello. Each of the would-be guardians gets one half of a ring, and so do the two heirs, and they have to fight to get the other halves." He hesitated briefly. "The fights are conducted one-on-one and the winner is... part of it is which side comes out with the majority of the rings in the end, or so tradition says, but the only times it's ever come to a trial like this, one of the heirs has won so decisively that the number of rings

hasn't really mattered."

Something like a smile touched Xanxus' mouth. "Fighting." There was a note of obscure satisfaction in the way she pronounced it. "Aren't you forgetting something?" When Sawada blinked, she said, "I don't have guardians."

"You already have a Rain," Sawada countered. He jerked his chin Squalo's way. "Or what's he, chopped liver?"

"Have some ideas about the rest, Boss, if you want them," Squalo offered when she turned faintly disbelieving eyes on him. "Levi's a little young, but he's all yours if you want him for Lightning. Calla's a Cloud, but I think she'll stand up for you. That's three right there." He was pretty sure of Lussuria for Sun, too. Mist and Storm, he didn't quite know yet. Mammon was—well, he was Mammon, the greedy little shit—and they had several strong Storms, but none that he could think of offhand who were particularly loyal to Xanxus.

All that was a problem that depended on her saying yes, of course.

Xanxus looked at him, holding his eyes, and for the life of him, he couldn't have said what it was she was thinking. Then she looked away, to Sawada. "If I walk into a fight with Enrico Vongola, only one of us is going to walk away again. You get that, right?"

Sawada didn't flinch from the steel in her eyes, which was one mark in his favor. "That's also an acceptable way of ending the trial."

She grunted. "Long as we have that clear."

"Perfectly." Sawada went quiet, maybe waiting for her to say something else, but she didn't—she lapsed into silence, her gaze turned inward, focused on something only she could see. He cleared his throat. "So you're willing to do it?"

Xanxus' lip curled. "I don't think I have much choice, do I?"

"There's always a choice." Sawada's voice was quiet, but just for a moment, Squalo could see the Vongola blood he'd claimed in the man. "The options may not always be good ones, but there's always a choice."

Xanxus looked away from him. "Whatever. You know I can't say no."

Squalo frowned—the hell she couldn't—but Sawada beat him to it.

"You could. But I'm glad you're not."

She didn't actually say anything to that. After a moment, Sawada sighed. "We don't have long before Enrico pushes us into declaring him the heir. How soon can you be ready for him?"

"I could take him right now." Xanxus showed her teeth when Sawada gave her a frankly skeptical look. "I *could*." Her eyes turned hot. "His Flame never was half as strong as mine." And that was only the truth, as far as Squalo knew.

"And if it isn't a fight based on the Flame?" Sawada asked.

Xanxus growled and Squalo held his breath, not having heard much sanity in the sound, but after a moment she said, "Two weeks."

Sawada nodded. "Two weeks it is. I can stall for that long easily enough. We'll settle on your guardians and start things moving when you're ready." She nodded and that was that, apparently. Sawada stood. "Okay!" He beamed at them both. "I'm beat. See you in the morning. Don't stay up too late." He winked at them and sauntered out, making for the bedrooms at the back of the building and leaving them alone again.

Squalo sat quietly, watching her. Her expression had withdrawn again, gone far away from him. He knotted his fingers together, acid rage etching his soul. They hadn't just stolen time from her, they'd stolen other things, too, God knew how much, and he was going to see them all burn for it.

"So Federico was telling the truth after all." The words plunked out, breaking their silence. Xanxus still wasn't looking at him or anything he could see, and her voice was harsh.

"Guess he was, yeah." Squalo didn't know what he felt about that, exactly, hadn't really had the time or inclination to think about it. Didn't matter too much to him, except—it mattered to her. And so... "Figures that Enrico would go for the only ones who were worth a damn."

Xanxus' eyes flicked up and he recognized the expression: it was the one that meant she was confused on some point but didn't want to ask for clarification. "You and Federico, Boss." He reached for his glass of wine and tipped some of it down his throat. "You're the only two of them worth the name." Easy enough to be generous to Federico now. Nil nisi bonum and all that.

He saw her throat move like she was swallowing something down. Squalo just shrugged at her—it was the truth—and after a moment she moved, turning away from him. "I'm going to bed."

Squalo sucked in a breath—he'd been dreading this since their first conversation in the car when he'd seen the wildness and distrust in her eyes. "We've got three bedrooms, Boss." He looked up at her as frankly as he could manage when she glanced over her shoulder at him. "Want me to come with you or not?"

Xanxus gave him another of those looks he didn't know how to read—was going to have to learn how to read if it killed him. (And he tried not to think that it might, when it had been that it wouldn't; one more thing to lay at the Ninth and Enrico's feet.) "Come on," she said.

The wash of relief made him dizzy. "Yes, Boss." He pushed himself to his feet. "Anything you want."

Xanxus opened her mouth like there was something she wanted to say, but changed her mind and left it unsaid. She turned away after a moment and headed for the bedrooms. Squalo followed after her, because that was the only thing he knew to do.

Xanxus threw herself into training at first light the next morning, which meant that that evening was the last the three of them talked about—anything, really, beyond a few quotidian exchanges regarding food or the weather—for several days. Xanxus never had been *chatty* before, exactly, but now she was positively taciturn. She worked out in grim silence, running through the trees and hills and improvising weights and doing things that weren't quite kata—she'd never picked up any of the formal styles, far as Squalo knew—but were the next best thing for her idiosyncratic style of fighting. Squalo kept pace with her to make sure that she wasn't overworking herself after the months of being held in the Vendicare's damned tanks—or that was his excuse, even after the first wobbly days had passed and it was clear that she wasn't going to be collapsing of over-exertion. She drove herself all day, until it was too dark to see, and then collapsed into bed to sleep like the dead before getting up and doing it all over again.

Considering the way her first night of freedom had been filled with nightmares, Squalo suspected that the pace she'd set herself wasn't entirely about Enrico. It was one more thing to add to the list of things for which Enrico and his father were responsible, one more thing they

were going to have to pay for.

He was going to enjoy the day when it came time for them to settle up—it was coming, and fast. Xanxus showed herself no mercy and regained her strength and edge at a pace that should have been impossible, but was simply her. She rounded on Squalo an afternoon a scant ten days after they'd gotten her out, startling him into an impromptu sparring match that harried him through the trees behind the house, and Squalo found that he needed all his skill to keep up with her.

That realization unknotted one more of his fears as they ducked and ran between the trees, her hunting him and him using the cover of the trunks to dodge blasts of Flame. Squalo found himself laughing for the first time in months as they closed with each other again, even when she turned aside the edge of his blade and came up inside his guard to land a fist in his gut and drive him down to the ground as the breath gusted out of him. He sprawled in the dirt, breathless with that and the relief bubbling through him—she was *back*—and grinned up at her as she pinned him.

She tucked the muzzle of her gun under his chin, her eyes dark and wild, and the laughter stilled in his throat. "Boss," he said, conscious of her finger resting against the trigger. He swallowed, feeling the heat of the metal digging into his skin as his throat bobbed, and lay very still.

The wildness in her eyes didn't ease, exactly, but it changed subtly. She changed the angle of the gun, ran the muzzle along his jaw, watching him all the while. "You'd still let me do it, wouldn't you?"

"If that's what you wanted, Boss." He lay perfectly still, barely even drawing breath. "I'm all yours. If that's what you want..." He bit his lip as the muzzle pressed against his skin and stopped at the soft skin under his ear, where a bullet would shatter everything in one shot. "I... know I failed you. If this is what you want, it's... I can't say I haven't earned it."

Xanxus stared down at him and Squalo held his breath. Even the insects and the birds in the trees seemed to have gone silent as he waited for her to decide, or maybe it was just the blood rushing in his ears that drowned out all other sound. A line appeared between her eyebrows as she frowned down at him. "Failed me."

He didn't dare nod, so he wet his lips instead. "I... let them take you. I

didn't see them coming, I didn't stop them, I didn't even fight them. I should have. I should have died before I let them lay a hand on you." There, he'd finally said it, all the things that had gnawed on him since the moment he'd woken up on the floor of the Varia's front hall and puked his guts up. "I'm sorry, Boss."

Something twisted in her eyes, there and gone before he knew what it was. "You... he had a gun on you. He would have killed you before you could have done anything."

Squalo managed to shake his head, the barest fraction of a movement, protesting that. "It doesn't matter! I should have tried anyway. They had you, Boss! And I *let* them!"

Whatever it was moved in her eyes again. "You stupid bastard." She took the gun away, shoving it into its holster, and grabbed his collar to shake him. "I gave you orders about getting yourself shot."

She had, and they'd been what had kept him from acting, and had kept him up countless nights since. "It doesn't matter, Boss—you—I—my place is keeping you safe. Nothing else is more important than that. And I didn't."

Xanxus growled something, eyes glittering with a more recognizable kind of anger. "You're wrong." She shook him again and dropped him; Squalo saw stars when his head hit the ground. "You didn't fail me. Get that out of your stupid fucking head." She ran her fingers through her hair, raking it back from her face. "There were more of them than there were of me. Even if you'd tried something, they would have killed you and I still would have—it wouldn't have mattered. But then who would have gotten me out afterwards?"

It felt like she'd punched him again, in a way, knocking him senseless. Squalo stared at her, lost. "You—but—"

She scowled at him, eyes snapping. "I don't want you dead, you idiot. Get that through your fucking head."

Squalo couldn't help the way that shook him, unknotting something else in his chest—part of the way, only part of the way, because there was no way he was going to forgive *himself* for not having protected her. "Boss," he breathed.

She looked at him, eyes dark, and touched his jaw, cupping it in her palm. "Got a name."

Squalo swallowed hard at that, at the way her voice had dropped, and raised a shaking hand to cover hers. "Xanxus." He hadn't said it since that first conversation in the car, hadn't dared to, and now it tasted sweet on his tongue.

Xanxus exhaled. "Yeah."

Squalo looked up at her, the new shadows that lurked in her eyes, the places where her cheeks were still too thin—it wasn't *fair*, not that the universe seemed to care much about that—and turned his face to kiss her palm. "Still yours, Xanxus. Heart and body and soul." Which reminded him about the last time he'd said that, surprising a breath of a chuckle out of him. "Swore it on the old man's ring, even."

The sound she made was a dangerous one, but he was pretty sure it wasn't aimed at him. "What?"

"He wanted to know whether I still served him, after. And I told him I served the blood of the Vongola." Squalo grinned up at her. "Not my fault if he didn't ask me what I meant by that, is it?"

He wasn't sure that she'd appreciate the joke, but after a second's hesitation she snorted. "I guess not." She ran her thumb over his cheek. "But... still mine. Even after... all that."

Not for the first time, he wondered what had gone on while she was inside the Vendicare's walls. What had happened to her. She hadn't breathed a word of it—might never, if he knew her, just like she'd never said a word about her life before the Vongola.

But that was her decision to make, so he stroked his fingers along the backs of hers. "Always. Nothing's going to change that, not ever."

Xanxus sighed; he thought that maybe some of the shadows in her eyes eased with that promise. "Squalo..."

Her weight had him pressed against the ground and kept him pinned there when she leaned down to kiss him. Squalo sighed into her mouth, the fear that she wasn't going to want this from him slipping away as she pressed her mouth against his and stroked her tongue between his lips.

God only knew where Sawada was, not to mention the fact that carrying on in clear earshot of the house wasn't the best idea ever, but Xanxus' kiss turned hotter anyway, more demanding, and suddenly none of that mattered anymore. Heat throbbed through Squalo,

surging up with a vengeance as Xanxus nipped at his lower lip. "Xanxus," he said as she shifted over him, straddling his hips and planting her hands on his shoulders, holding him in place beneath her. He gestured toward her hips and the skirt beginning to ride up her thighs. "Please, can I...?"

He barely caught her shiver, it was so tiny, but her voice was hoarse when she said, "Not this time. Next time."

Squalo closed his eyes and forced himself to subside under her, doing his best to melt into the earth beneath his shoulders instead of leaping up to go kill every last bandaged freak the Vendicare could claim as their own. "Anything you want," he told her once he'd gotten a grip on himself. "Anything at all."

Xanxus' sigh brushed against his mouth before she kissed him again. Squalo surrendered himself to that, opening his mouth to hers and moaning at the ruthless way she pressed her advantage, still poised above him and pinning his shoulders beneath her hands as she kissed him, until his cock was aching with how hard he was and she was breathless. He groaned his relief when she reached down to undo his fly, and shivered when she settled back on her heels. It was a struggle to hold himself still when she slid a hand under the hem of her skirt. He couldn't *see* anything except for the flush that rose over her throat and cheeks, the look of concentration in her eyes and the way she caught a lip between her teeth as her wrist flexed back and forth, but that was all enough, in its own way.

The fact that she was here at all—that she still wanted this with him, whatever had happened before—that was more than enough.

He had to sink his fingers into the earth over his head when she finally reached for him, taking his cock in wet fingers as she raised herself up over him and guided him against her. He gasped her name, sweat slicking his skin as he held himself still for her, not rocking himself up into the slick heat of her body, and shuddered when she finally settled herself over him, her eyes closed and her expression swept clean and open.

Xanxus opened her eyes after an endless moment and looked down at him, saying his name softly. She bent down to him, sighing as they ground against each other, and caught his hands to pin them against the ground as she kissed him again. Squalo groaned for her as she began to move against him, rocking her hips back and forth, taking her pleasure from him at her own pace until he was panting against

her mouth with the way pleasure was firing along his every nerve. She made soft sounds against his lips and the first slow rhythm of her hips picked up speed, turning urgent all too quickly, until she lifted a hand away from his wrists and reached down between them again. The sound she made against his mouth when she came was nearly a groan, low and hoarse. Squalo lost it as her body closed and rippled around his, hips driving up against hers as he fell over the edge after her.

Xanxus caught herself over him, breathing hard. When Squalo opened the eyes he hadn't realized he'd closed, he saw that she was looking at him. If her eyes were dark, at least they were focused on him and this moment. Whatever she saw as he looked back at her seemed to please her, because her mouth softened. "Mine," she said, letting go of him and touching his cheek again.

Squalo nodded. "Yours," he agreed, turning his face to kiss her fingertips. "I love you."

She didn't say anything in reply, but leaned down and pressed her mouth against his again, long and slow, which was better than anything she could have said. And she didn't freeze when Squalo lifted a hand to thread through her hair, either, which spoke louder than anything else.

When she finally pulled away from him, her eyes were clearer than they had been since before. "C'mon," she said. "Let's tell Sawada that it's time."

Squalo took a breath and gave her the only possible reply: "Yes, Boss. Anything you say."

As far as anyone at the main house knew, Squalo was still in Florence, putting the fear of him and the Vongola in the Orsini. Since that was something that Lametti and his Mist partner were handling in his stead, it made for a circumspect sort of homecoming.

Given how tense Xanxus was, which was understandable given the operation they were about to launch as soon as Sawada got his hands on his half of the rings, perhaps it was just as well that they made use of one of the backdoors into headquarters, the one that came up through the wine cellars. Thus Xanxus' first homecoming was remarked only by the two standing sentry in the cellars.

"Hey, Boss," Omar said, casual, as Squalo emerged from the door hidden behind the third wine rack from the southwest corner. Then

Xanxus stepped out after Squalo and he dropped the handful of cards he'd been holding. "Holy shit! Boss!"

His partner Vera was more taciturn and had a far greater presence of mind; she tried to shuffle the evidence of their card game to the side as Xanxus swept her gaze over them both. "Welcome back, Boss."

Xanxus ignored both the standard greeting and the nonstandard one and focused on the cards, frowning hard at them. "Aren't you supposed to be on sentry duty?"

She hadn't been gone for so long that either Omar or Vera had forgotten that chilly tone; they went white and nervous and drew themselves up to attention. "Yes, Boss," they chorused.

"Then what the fuck are those?" Xanxus swept on without waiting for an answer. "Are you Varia or not? Get those out of my sight, you fucking trash."

Wasn't a good idea to grin in front of the subordinates who were being dressed down, so Squalo bit down on the inside of his cheek to keep his face straight. Omar and Vera hustled to get the cards out of sight under Xanxus' blistering glare; they probably didn't want to be an object lesson, but it was their own damned fault, and more importantly, they were making it very clear that Xanxus was back. Or would, once they'd gone off duty. Same difference.

"If I catch you playing cards on duty again, I'll make you wish you'd never been born," Xanxus informed them once the cards had been put away, and prowled past them, gait smooth and elegantly dangerous.

Squalo paused just long enough to add, "Hope you kids enjoy guard duty, because you're on it for the next month," before following after her.

Lussuria was as good as his word; he'd promised to have things arranged for Squalo before he'd left with Sawada, and had gotten the squad leaders wrangled into the mission room for them, which meant everyone was in the right place when Xanxus strode in and dropped herself into her chair at the head of the table with her usual feline grace. "All right," she said over the sounds of Lussuria's cackling laughter and Sera's sputtering. "I'm back." She shot a look at Cavilo, who had gone white and angry. "Any of you got a problem with that?"

Lussuria abandoned the seat at her right hand and Squalo claimed it. Most of them were looking at Cavilo, actually, and she wasn't so

missed that she didn't recognize the fact. Her lip curled and she spread her hands in front of her. "Who could have a problem?" Her smile turned thin and sardonic. "The Varia just hasn't been the same since you left."

Xanxus gave her a hard look and then smirked. "Damn straight it hasn't." She leaned back in her chair and crossed one leg over the other. "All right, listen up, people. Things are about to get exciting around here. The Ninth needs himself an heir to take over whenever he kicks off. That fucker Enrico thinks it ought to be him, and I say I'd rather shoot myself than let that happen."

A little stir ran around the table as she made her stance clear, and Levi cleared his throat. "If you don't want him to be boss, then what are you going to do about it?"

Bless Levi's politically naïve heart. Squalo folded his arms across his chest and smirked as Sera rolled her eyes. "What do you think she's going to do?" She grinned. "Enrico's a dead man walking." She narrowed her eyes at Xanxus. "What I want to know is who you've got in mind to take his place."

Xanxus shrugged. "Seems like I'm going to need myself a set of guardians."

The room went the kind of quiet that only came when a group of people were collectively holding their breaths. Calla was the first to break it. She laid her hands on the table, spreading them in front of her, and said, voice even and sure, "I would stand as your Cloud, Boss."

Xanxus nodded. "I thought you would." She glanced at Levi. "How about you?"

Levi's eyes had gone round as coins as the implications of that sank in for him. "Boss, I—yes, of course, anything you want," he stuttered, pretty much the way Squalo'd expected him to.

Xanxus was already nodding and looking past him to Lussuria, who was grinning from ear to ear. "You?"

"The Vongola never had as fabulous a Sun as me," he assured her. "Be delighted, Boss."

Which brought them to Cavilo, who was just about the strongest Storm the Varia had at the moment, and was the sticky point. One of

them. Squalo spared another moment to wish that kid Belphegor was just a few years older and a shade less psychopathic as Cavilo and Xanxus locked gazes again. Calculation narrowed Cavilo's eyes. "So," Xanxus said after a moment of that. "What's it going to be?"

Cavilo drummed restless fingers against the table; Squalo could just about see the gears turning in her head: how did being the Tenth's Storm stack up against her desire to lead the Varia? After a long minute, Cavilo pursed her lips and shrugged. "You need a Storm, I'll be it." She didn't quite look Squalo's way, but he'd have bet anything that she was thinking about who would hold the Varia after Xanxus was getting on being the Tenth and Squalo was busy being her right hand.

They would just have to burn that bridge once they got to it, though. There were too many other things that needed attention in the here and now to borrow trouble from the future.

Xanxus looked at Mammon and Sera next. "I need a Mist," she said. "And whichever one of you it ends up being is going to have to face this asshole Salvatore. Which one of you wants it?"

Huh. He hadn't actually thought she'd really leave the choice to them.

Mammon and Sera glanced at each other. After a moment of them communicating silently, Sera tilted her head to the side and said, tone neutral, "You're stronger."

"I have other concerns." Mammon's voice was equally uninflected. "Long-term ones."

Sera's mouth curved faintly. "How about I contract it to you? One fight and we switch off after the dust settles."

Mammon went silent, considering it. "How much?"

"Standard fees," she offered, eyes gleaming. "Plus the satisfaction of grinding Salvatore into paste."

Mammon mulled that over, lifting one tiny hand almost absently to touch whatever it was that hung beneath his robe. "I suppose that would be acceptable."

"Done, then." Having concluded their negotiations, Sera flashed a sharp smile up the table. "Work for you, Boss?"

Xanxus snorted. "Works for me." She looked to Squalo last. "And you?"

Squalo inclined his head. "You know I will, Boss." Had to make it formal, after all, even if there hadn't been any question where he would stand.

"All right, then." Xanxus looked around the table, expression too neutral to give away whatever it was she was thinking. Then she nodded, short. "Here's how it's gonna work. They're going to push for an official confirmation ceremony for Enrico. When that happens, Sawada's going to grab his half of the rings and bring them to us. At that point it goes to the Cervello to arbitrate and we'll fight to claim the other half of the rings." She paused. "I don't care how your fights go, with one exception. I want Salvatore dead, and I'm going to kill Enrico."

Squalo considered it for a moment in the little silence after that, the considering, reflective pause as they absorbed that. "Might be best to make a clean sweep of it, Boss. I don't know that you're going to want to leave them alive behind you."

She frowned, but Lussuria chimed in, too, rubbing his chin. "Considering who he's pulled for his guardians, yeah. I'm with Squalo on this one. Leaving them alive is asking for trouble." He shrugged. "The good news is that none of them can fight his way out of a wet paper bag."

"The bad news is that most of them play politics," Sera said. "Won't stick a knife in your back, not unless they thought they could get away with it, but manipulate someone else into doing it for them? Yeah. They're the kind that would be all over that."

Xanxus pressed her lips together, probably more because they were arguing than because she cared whether they killed Enrico's guardians or not, but no one lasted as a squad leader without having at least a few brains and a modicum of common sense. "Fine. Put them down if it'll make you feel better. Doesn't matter to me."

Squalo eyed them, but it didn't look like he'd need to make sure that any of them would misinterpret that. Well, Varia. The real challenge would have been trying to keep them from killing their prospective opponents. Just as well that he didn't have to try.

Xanxus leaned back in her seat. "All right, that's that. Figure out who you're going to be facing and prep it like a mission." She opened her hand then. "Now fill me in, people. Status reports on what I've missed. Lussuria, how's first squad looking?"

Another piece of the tension Squalo had been carrying melted away as Lussuria blinked and switched gears into an update on first squad's activities during Xanxus' imprisonment. Yeah, Xanxus was home, and one more piece of things was back where it belonged.

Chapter 5

Squalo was in the middle of hashing out the quarterly expenses—technically Xanxus' job, but until the main house knew she was back they had to maintain cover (or so she'd said, and if it was actually because she never had liked dealing with the budget, well, he wasn't going to say anything) when he heard the ruckus start up downstairs. He dropped his pen and bolted to his feet, adrenaline crashing the world into sharp focus and stark primary colors. He fell in at Xanxus' elbow as they raced downstairs to the source of the shouting and crashes.

The old man's guardians were there in the front hall, Storm and Cloud and Rain, brawling with the bulk of fifth squad and Levi himself. And there was someone else in the hall, an interloper whose tiny figure proclaimed *Arcobaleno*, though for the life of him Squalo didn't know who that tiny cloaked figure was.

Whoever it was had gotten behind their people and seemed to be the object of Gemello, Purezza, and Martelli's attention. No one seemed to have recognized that he and Xanxus had arrived on the staircase that swept down to the hall, or that more Varia were pouring in from the rest of the building—the three geezers threw themselves at Levi and his people, struggling the break the line they held and do God alone knew what, and fifth squad held firm, refusing to cede a centimeter of tiled floor.

Xanxus got their attention by drawing one of her guns and firing a shot into the ceiling.

The Ninth's people and fifth squad froze at the roar of the gun. As plaster rained down on the scene, the *Arcobaleno* whirled and flowed up the steps to where they stood. "Xanxus of the Vongola," it—she? she, Squalo thought, though that was only a guess—said as she drew a small, flat box from beneath the muffling folds of her cloak. "I have a delivery for you." She tossed the box Xanxus' way as someone else—Purezza, Squalo thought—shouted an angry protest.

Xanxus caught it in her off hand, casual. "Yeah? Who's it from?" she asked as she flipped the catch open to look inside. There were seven half-rings nestled inside, six forming half a circle around the seventh, all of them sparkling against black velvet.

"Guess," the *Arcobaleno* said, tone dry as a desert.

The Ninth's people looked like they were thinking about doing something really damn stupid, Squalo decided, looking at the strain on their faces. He took stock of who they had on the scene and gestured. Lussuria nodded and flowed left, his people fanning out with him. Calla didn't nod, but she closed in on the right, her people slipping in to fill the holes in Levi's defense, and she was smiling in the way that promised mayhem.

At his feet, the Arcobaleno drew herself up to her full height. "I am charged with one other task," she intoned. "Xanxus of the Vongola, the outside advisor of the Family has selected you as his candidate for the position of Vongola Decimo. Do you accept his nomination?"

Xanxus looked straight at the geezer contingent and showed them her teeth as she shoved her gun back into its holster. "I do." She ran her fingers over the constellation of half-rings, drew out the Sky ring from the heart of it, and slipped it onto her finger.

"And do you have guardians who will hold the rings and serve as the core of your Family?" the Arcobaleno continued.

The Ninth's people seemed to have rooted in place and were staring up at the ritual unfolding above them like they couldn't believe it was actually happening.

Xanxus handed the box to Squalo. He closed it and tucked it inside his jacket as Xanxus' eyes went bright with savage joy and she said, "Yes, I do."

The Arcobaleno nodded, grave, and continued. "I must inform you that your brother Enrico has been selected by Vongola Nono as his candidate. If you will not stand aside for Enrico, the law of the Vongola and the rings says that you and your guardians must meet him and his guardians in a trial for the ownership of the rings." Her voice, piping though it was, had a certain gravity to it that seemed to suck all their attention to her. "Will you stand aside for Enrico?"

"Never," Xanxus said, slow and deliberate, and the three geezers all seemed to sigh and wilt with that.

The Arcobaleno nodded. "Very well, then. The outside advisor and the Ninth will meet with the Cervello to determine the place and manner of your trial, and the Cervello will inform you of their terms."

"Sounds good to me." Xanxus closed her fist and looked at the ring shining on her hand, oddly shaped as it was. "Anything else?"

The Arcobaleno shook her head.

"Good." Xanxus looked down at the ground floor, staring at the geezers. "Someone seems to have let some trash blow in. Clean it up, people."

That broke the spell that had been holding the three of them silent. "This can't be happening," Gemello protested. He pointed up the stairs at Xanxus. "The Vendicare took you!"

Squalo grinned down at him, knowing his smile was sharp. "Guess they gave her back, huh?" he said, drawling the words out and watching the anger flare on Purezza's face—yeah, the old lady was going to be a problem no matter how this shook out. But that was how Clouds were.

Martelli wasn't known for being the Ninth's most level-headed guardian without reason. His dark face was cold and hard, but he set hands on Gemello and Purezza's shoulders. "I believe we ought to let Timoteo know what has happened here," he told them, drawing them backwards toward the door.

"But the rings," Gemello protested.

"It's too late," Purezza bit out as the Varia kept pace with them, advancing as they retreated. "The other candidate has them now." She shot a venomous look at Xanxus. "For all the good it'll do her."

"But she *can't* be Tenth," Gemello said, the objection almost plaintive. "She's—"

"It's time to go," Martelli said, loud and firm, before they could all find out what Xanxus was, or was not. He drew his companions out and Levi sprang forward to bar the door after him.

Squalo exhaled and got down to business. "All right, I want to know how the *fuck* we let enemy forces get *inside the fucking building*!"

"My fault, I'm afraid." The Arcobaleno didn't sound particularly apologetic about it. "They were in pursuit of me and the rings and were too close to keep out when I came in."

Hah. Too close, she said. Excuses, excuses. Squalo scowled at Levi anyway, because both he and his people ought to have known better than that. Looked like they knew it now, at least, judging by the hangdog looks on their faces. "Seems like fifth squad needs to spend

some more training hall, if you ask me." And that was letting them off lightly.

But hell, the case of rings was a solid weight inside his jacket, so he could afford to be a little lenient. "Don't let me catch you slacking off again."

The Arcobaleno snorted softly. Squalo couldn't see much of her expression between the high collar of her cloak and the visor she wore, but he thought she was amused. She dusted her hands off. "I'll be going," she announced, and turned to hop back down the steps.

Mammon had come in during the commotion; when she saw him, she drew herself up short. They stared at each other for a long, silent moment before she snorted again and went on her way, shaking her tiny head as she did, and Mammon turned away, unconcerned as a cat.

Arcobaleno. Who could understand them?

Squalo shook his own head and looked to the boss, who was looking at her fist and the ring shining on her finger and showing her teeth in a fierce smile. "What do we do now, Boss?"

Xanxus looked up. "Hand 'em out and wait till it's time to go claim the other half of 'em."

Squalo couldn't help grinning. "Can do, Boss."

He would have liked to have been a fly on the wall for the conversation where the Ninth and Enrico found out who Sawada's candidate was, but the next best thing was the news Calla's squad—preternaturally good at gathering information as it was—brought them. From the sounds of it, the main house was in an uproar. The Ninth wasn't speaking to Sawada and had banned all of CEDEF from his presence. His own guardians, according to Calla's report, were just as pissed, and Enrico had taken the news that he was going to have to *fight* Xanxus badly indeed.

The rumors that he'd actually *fainted* were probably exaggerated by at least a couple of degrees, but Squalo savored them anyway, rolling them around on his tongue like a rare wine while they waited for the Cervello to come and tell them the terms of the trial.

A day passed, then two, without any word of the trial. Squalo was

starting to get itchy about that silence when the Cervello finally showed up. God only knew how the two of them got into the place, but they did, sliding right past all the security measures a team of sixty-odd paranoid assassins could dream up and waltzing into Xanxus' office like they owned the place. "Xanxus of the Vongola," they chorused, which was possibly even creepier than the identical hair and the masks across the upper halves of their faces. "You and your guardians are charged to come to the Vongola house tonight at eight p.m. for the trial of the rings. You and your guardians will face Enrico Vongola and his guardians in single combat for possession of the rings. If you fail to come to this trial, all your half-rings will be considered forfeit."

Xanxus nodded her acceptance of that; the Cervello nodded in reply and slipped out as mysteriously as they had arrived in the first place. Squalo put that aside to figure out later, when he could afford the luxury of having a fit over that breach in security, and looked at Xanxus.

She wasn't looking at him; she was staring into space at something only she could see, the way she did a lot these days, so Squalo held his peace and went to spread the news. He kept an eye on Xanxus and her quiet mood the rest of the day, until she caught him watching her as they got themselves geared up for the coming fights (like they were just another mission, just another job for the elite Varia).

She raised her eyebrows as she checked the distribution of the holsters on her hips, making minute adjustments to the angle of her belt. "What?"

Squalo shrugged at her. "Nothing, really." Nothing he could put into words easily, anyway, though there was a part of him made uneasy by her silence and the thought of the coming fight. Which was strange; he'd been anticipating this day and the prospect of Enrico fucking Vongola's death for *months* now.

Xanxus looked back at him, her eyes dark, things moving in them like the creatures that swam in deep water, mysterious and unknowable. At length she returned her attention to her guns, checking the action of the slides and inspecting the magazines. "You worry too much."

Squalo surprised himself by saying, "Considering the shit that Enrico and Salvatore have pulled off so far, I'm not sure I worry enough." But then, it was true, wasn't it? They'd done so much that it couldn't come down to something as easy as a set of one-on-one fights like this,

could it?

Xanxus huffed faintly and holstered her guns. "Maybe. You ready?"

There was only one possible response for that. "When you are, Boss."

She accepted that as her due, which it was, and they went to round up the others. The trip up to the main house was quiet, the way traveling to a job always was, and went by too fast for Squalo to pay attention to it. Not that he had much attention to spare for anything but the woman at the head of them, her hips moving with every long stride and her head held high, just the way it should be.

She didn't even falter when she walked into the main house and was greeted by the hostile stares of the staff and underbosses gathered there. "I'm here for the ring trial," she announced, clear and firm, and waited.

And waited a little longer, until one of the Cervello showed up, anonymous and indistinguishable from the two who'd shown up earlier in the day to announce the coming trial. "This way, please."

At least part of the past couple of days of waiting seemed to be due to the way someone had turned one of the gardens at the rear of the place into a field, a level arena surrounded by walls and a pair of spectator areas, lit by a string of floodlights overhead. The Ninth's people were already there, filling one of the areas reserved for the spectators. The old man's guardians surrounded him, and Squalo had to think that the old man didn't look very good—exhausted and careworn, maybe, or like a man confronted by a living nightmare. He all but flinched when Xanxus cast one look his direction and then looked away from him.

Federico's people were there, too, which Squalo supposed he should have expected. They stood in a tight cluster apart from the Ninth's people, huddled around a single man at the core—Fedele Rizzo, the man whose testimony had damned Xanxus. He glared at Xanxus now, the look in his eyes making Squalo's fingers itch for the grip of a sword and the ability to end a clear threat to his boss. Xanxus ignored them altogether, because all her attention was focused on the third group of people, the group that contained Enrico and Salvatore.

And she was smiling, but Squalo could tell that there wasn't anyone at home behind that smile. Well, not anyone fully sane. From the way Enrico was pale and his people were crowded close around him, they could tell, too.

The one group of people, or at least the one person who *wasn't* there was Sawada, which must have meant that what Calla's squad had reported about the Ninth's injunction against the CEDEF must have been true. It meant that there wasn't anyone else in the other little spectator area to stand up for them, but Squalo guessed that figured. It always had been Xanxus against the rest of her Family, and the only person who'd ever even sort of stood in her corner with her was dead now.

Maybe it signified something that Massimo wasn't there to watch, or maybe it didn't; he couldn't make up his mind which it might be.

One of the Cervello stepped forward precisely at the stroke of eight. "The two heirs are present," she announced, formal as a priest at Mass. "The trial of the rings will now commence. Each holder of a Vongola half-ring will meet the holder of its other half in this arena, and will fight each other upon our mark. The winner of each fight will be awarded the loser's half of the ring. Any outside interference in the battle will mean the immediate forfeit of one's half-ring, as well as the half-ring of the one interfering." She paused, turning her gaze first to Enrico and then to Xanxus. "Do you understand and accept these terms?"

"Yes," Xanxus said, her voice harsh. Compared to that, Enrico's "Yes, I do," was far less steady.

"The terms have been accepted," the Cervello intoned. "The trial will begin. Holders of the Cloud half-rings, please come forth."

Lussuria whistled near-soundlessly as Calla detached herself from them at the same time the burliest member of Enrico's little group stepped forward. "God, are they in for a bad first match or what?"

Enrico's Cloud—Feoli, one of the ones Squalo'd never met personally, but who their intel said preferred hand-to-hand, and whose prizefighter's face showed it—didn't seem to agree. "Is this really fair?" he boomed as Calla entered the ring across from him, her steps light and soundless. "Putting a little girl like that up against me?"

Sera sighed. "So much for that one."

Lussuria snickered.

Calla didn't say anything as Feoli entered the arena with her, just stood with her hands resting lightly on the pommels of her daggers and no expression at all on her face. Either Feoli hadn't done his own

homework on the Varia or he just hadn't taken it seriously, because he kept going, digging himself in deeper. "If you want to forfeit right now, honey, feel free. No one will think worse of you for it."

The Cervello stepped out of the ring when Calla didn't reply. "You may begin."

Feoli cocked his head, looking Calla over. "Well?" he said as he cracked his knuckles. "What's it going to be? I'd feel awful smashing up a pretty little thing like you—"

Calla struck, dropping into motion between one heartbeat and the next, her wickedly curved daggers appearing in her hand like a conjuror's trick. For such a big man, Feoli was light on his feet; he leapt back and swore in surprise as she laid a cut open on his forearm. "Why you little bitch—"

Calla danced away from him as he turned on her, swinging his fists for her face, and ducked in close again, slipping a dagger along his thigh and the other across his ribs. The cuts were shallow ones, though they bled well enough, and didn't slow Feoli down. He dropped into a crouch, bringing his fists up to guard against her. "Is that really the best you can do, honey?" he asked as they circled each other. "I've hurt myself worse shaving."

Calla didn't say anything to that, either, but then, she didn't have to. The fey curve of her smile said it all for her, and so did the blood shining on the edges of her blades. Not that Feoli recognized that yet.

Feoli feinted left and dropped his right hand into a blow that Calla spun away from. He snorted as she did. "What's the matter, don't you want to get a little closer and try to stick me again?"

Calla slipped back and tipped her head to the side, regarding him. "No," she said. "I don't need to."

"What?" Feoli's forehead wrinkled as he tried to figure out what that meant. "I don't—"

He coughed then, raised his hand to his throat, and the look on his face would have been funny if Squalo hadn't known precisely what it meant.

Calla stepped back as he coughed again. "I mean that you're already dead."

Feoli's eyes widened as he began scrabbling at his throat in earnest. His face flushed, going red and then purple. Calla stood back, watching him, her mouth curling into a smile as he staggered sideways and went to a knee, gurgling, before falling over to thrash against the grass. She didn't stop smiling until his heels had finished drumming the ground, which was when she stepped forward to slide one dagger between his ribs to be sure of him and yank the ring off his neck.

The Cervello broke the silence as Calla wiped her daggers off on Feoli's shirt. "The winner of the Cloud battle is Calla of the Varia."

Xanxus didn't do anything more than smile faintly as Calla stepped back out of the arena, but then, Calla wasn't the sort who needed pats on the back to encourage her. Meanwhile, across the way, Enrico and his guardians looked torn between outrage and fear. After a moment, Enrico spoke up. "That can't be right!" he tried. "She just—poison should be cheating!"

The Cervello who seemed to be in charge of arbitrating the trial spread her hands. "Both candidates for Tenth have agreed to the terms as they stand." Her voice was nearly toneless. "There are no restrictions placed on the weapons that may be used in the individual trials." If that meant she thought Enrico was an idiot, Squalo couldn't tell, though he did think that some of the geezers, the Ninth included, looked faintly shamed by the protest. Well, they ought to be—that was their candidate who was showing himself to be an idiot and a coward.

It also suggested that Enrico's people really didn't have any idea what they were up against. Stupid of them, really. Who else was the boss of the Varia going to choose for guardians but members of the Varia?

Squalo only realized that he was grinning when Lussuria nudged him in the ribs with an elbow. "Stop that, you're scaring the opposition."

"I want them scared." Squalo focused his grin on Tirota, Enrico's Rain, who was looking grim.

"Not *that* scared, you don't. How'm I going to fight someone who's too terrified to move?" Lussuria retorted as a pair of the Cervello dragged Feoli's body out of the arena.

"You'll think of something." Then Squalo quieted himself as the lead Cervello stepped forward again—at least, he thought it was the same one. Was hard to tell with them.

"The ring trial will continue now," she said. "Will the holders of the Sun half-rings please come forward?"

"Oh, good," Lussuria muttered. "I get to go before you scare them all away." He straightened his shoulders and sashayed forward, practically swinging his hips like a woman. Squalo wasn't sure Lussuria's favorite head games were going to do him much good; Capolino had seen Lussuria in meetings and probably knew better than to assume that this sudden onset of flamboyance was all there was to his counterpart.

Capolino entered the ring after Lussuria, the long features of his narrow face drawing themselves out even longer as he sized Lussuria up. He twitched when Lussuria struck a hip-shot pose and looked him up and down, pouting. "So *you're* going to be my dance partner tonight? Pity." He sighed. "You're way too old for my tastes." Then he shook his head. "Needs must, I guess."

"What the fuck?" Capolino said, sounding as confused as he looked.

Lussuria raked his eyes over Capolino again, appraising him frankly. "You," he drawled. "Normally I like 'em young and sweet, but I guess I can't be too picky tonight." He rolled his head on his neck, loosening up his shoulders and shaking out his hands. "But maybe you'll look pretty enough when you're dead, huh? Won't matter too much then."

"You may begin when ready," the Cervello said as Capolino sputtered and choked on the implications of that.

Lussuria grinned and bounced on his feet as the Cervello stepped out of the arena. "Come on," he cooed. "Let's dance, sweetie. Sooner we get started, the sooner I can get to the good part."

"I've always wondered," Sera said, voice pitched low enough that it only hit friendly ears. "Does he really do the necrophilia thing, or is that just part of his shtick?"

"I decided a long time ago that I was a lot happier not knowing," Mammon replied as Lussuria began to move, dancing around Capolino with the speed that made facing him in a sparring match such a fucking pain. "Helps me sleep better at night."

Capolino was supposed to favor the gun; he'd managed to fumble it out and was trying to aim at Lussuria, but seemed to be having some trouble with that. "Why won't you hold still, you freak?" he demanded, firing off a shot that went well wide of where Lussuria actually was.

"Aw, now, what would the fun of that be?" Lussuria twisted out of the way of another shot.

He must have seemed like he was in a dozen places at once from Capolino's perspective, who certainly wouldn't have had the time to get used to how fast Lussuria's footwork could be. And wasn't used to the shit Lussuria talked in the ring, all the depraved promises he made about what he was going to do to Capolino once he was down and out. It showed in the way Capolino's hands were already shaking and his face gleamed with sweat.

When Lussuria brought himself in and swiped a kick at Capolino that knocked the man halfway across the arena, Capolino panicked, emptying the rest of his bullets in a wild spray of shots that didn't hit anything at all. Lussuria laughed as he did. "Now that's what I'm talking about," he pronounced, positively gleeful about it, and pounced on Capolino, fists and feet flying, before Capolino could even begin to think about reloading.

"He shouldn't play with his food so much," Cavilo said as they watched. "It's unattractive."

Squalo didn't quite agree, but then, he was watching the faces of their counterparts as Lussuria reduced Capolino to so much meat. What he saw there made satisfaction curl in his chest, warm and sweet. The Ninth and his people looked sick and Enrico was nearly green. Good, he thought, darting a glance at the still, intent look on Xanxus' face as she watched what was going on with the trial. It didn't change anything that had happened, but maybe it made up for some of it.

When Lussuria had finished with Capolino, there was nothing left of the man that was recognizable. Lussuria retrieved the ring from the body's neck as the Cervello announced his victory and all but bounced his way back over to their side of the ring. "Two down, Boss!" he announced as Calla passed him a towel for his hands.

Xanxus grunted, inclining her head. "Yeah. Good job."

Lussuria beamed at her. "My pleasure, Boss."

Across the way from them, the Ninth raised his hand to beckon the Cervello to him. He spoke to them quietly, moving his hands through the air to emphasize whatever point he was making. They listened intently, heads bent to catch his words, and nodded once he'd finished.

"The Ninth wishes us to emphasize that the rules do not require these trials to be to the death," their spokeswoman said as she returned to the ring and her companions cleared Capolino's body. "A clear victory over one's opponent is sufficient."

"What, really?" Xanxus' voice cut through the night, only calm on the surface. "It's come to this and you think we can settle it with anything less than blood?" She spat on the grass and jerked her head at the Cervello. "Let's get on with it."

The Cervello seemed to hesitate a moment—did she glance to the place where the Ninth sat looking like a man caught in a private hell?—and then said, "Will the holders of the Storm half-rings come forward?"

Cavilo then, and Suretti from Enrico's side. Suretti was supposed to be a swordsman. Squalo studied him and the saber he carried and concluded that Cavilo shouldn't have too much trouble with him.

Provided she held up her end of the bargain, of course, and fought for Xanxus. God only knew whether her erratic mood would support that or drive her to something else, though, was the thing. Squalo was mostly sure of her, but only mostly—

"You may begin when ready," the Cervello announced as she stepped back.

Cavilo dropped her bolas into her hand, sending them spinning, and fixed her eyes on Suretti's face.

Suretti had seen enough of them so far to have learned to be cautious. He dropped into a crouch, saber angled across his body in defense and his round face set and clearly afraid of her and of what Xanxus had just said. He and Cavilo stood still, watching each other, until Cavilo took a step forward and let the bolas fly.

He was good enough to read the attack and elude it, dodging to the side to keep the bolas from entangling him, but he wasn't good enough to have seen the knife Cavilo had dropped into her palm while he was watching the bolas. It caught him in the throat, sinking in to the hilt, and he dropped where he stood.

Squalo exhaled in private relief—self-interest had won out over the opportunity for a double-cross—as Cavilo went to retrieve her knife and the other half of her ring from Suretti's body, sauntering out of the ring before the Cervello had even begun to announce her victory.

That was one less thing he had to worry about, at least.

Cavilo smirked at Xanxus and got a bare dip of Xanxus' chin in reply, but that seemed good enough for the both of them.

So. Three for three now. Squalo edged himself closer to Xanxus and inclined his head toward her. "What do you think, Boss?"

She didn't take her eyes away from Enrico or his dwindling circle of cronies. "I think it's been easy so far."

Yeah, he kind of thought so, too. "Think they have something up their sleeves?" He was betting on it, just from the calm way Salvatore was watching the Cervello carry bodies off the field—those were supposed to be his fellow guardians, the ones who would stand with him at the core of Enrico's Family, but he was watching them die as if they were no more than an amusing diversion.

"Yeah," she said. "They have to."

The question of just what Enrico and Salvatore were planning remained unanswered and unanswerable and itched somewhere under Squalo's skin.

Once the field was clear, the Cervello announced the next battle: Lightning versus Lightning. Levi stepped forward, eager as a dog on the hunt. His counterpart Bucalo went much more slowly—Squalo thought that Enrico might have actually shoved him forward in order to get him moving.

Bucalo rallied once he was in the ring as Levi began unstrapping his parabolas. "What are you going to do, beat me to death with *umbrellas*?" he asked, incredulous. "Christ, *this* is how I'm going to die, really?"

Levi's back went stiff, but he carried on with what he was doing. It probably did look ridiculous to anyone who didn't know exactly what kind of destruction Levi could call down when he put his mind to it. And, hell, if Bucalo was too caught up in his own despair and disbelief to go at Levi before he got things arranged to his satisfaction, well. Maybe he deserved everything he was about to get, because some part of him was already dead.

The rest of him followed in short order, accompanied by the crack of lightning and the crawling feeling of electricity raising all the hair on Squalo's body, with the scent of ozone and burned flesh and Levi's

blinding grin when Xanxus grunted, "Good job" to him after the Cervello affirmed his victory.

And that was four rings out of four that they held now, a simple majority, which Squalo supposed made them the winners by default. They didn't have the Sky ring yet, which was the real trial as he understood it, and made the battles for the Rain and Mist nothing more than formalities—

Given the tension winding through him, anticipation for the trap that Salvatore and Enrico *had* to be planning humming through him, Squalo wasn't at all surprised when the next trial the Cervello called for was for the Rain.

The night air was turning cool on his teeth when he stepped into the arena to face Tirotta and the things he knew about his opponent were already ticking through his brain: more of a doer than a thinker, right-handed; used a gun and was reasonably competent with it. Tirotta's face was white, his expression set—not resigned or despairing, the way Bucalo had been before Levi's lightning had crawled down to end him, but bleakly determined. Huh. Looked like Enrico had found at least one halfway competent guardian, because Tirotta looked like he was determined to sell his life for his boss as dearly as possible.

Squalo'd thought a little bit about how he was going to handle his trial, whether he'd vent some of the rage he'd been reining in for so long on Tirotta or not, but the look in Tirotta's eyes decided him otherwise. There were better targets for that.

The Cervello said, "You may begin," and Tirotta moved, drawing and firing in a single smooth motion. Squalo grinned as he threw himself out of the way of the shot, his blade singing through the air as he twisted out of the way of Tirotta's shots and counted off bullets (one two three) and let the world fall away (four five) till there was nothing left but him and Tirotta (six seven eight) and the knowledge (nine ten) that only one of them was going to leave this space (eleven) alive (twelve thirteen).

He pushed himself forward, drawing on all the speed he possessed, and came up under Tirotta's guard to drive his sword up just so, angled between the man's ribs to slide through lungs and heart and punch out through his back.

Tirotta's breath sighed out of him and his eyes met Squalo's; Squalo held them, accepting the man's resignation and anger as his weight

folded around the blade, until the light had gone out of them altogether. He eased Tirotta off his blade and to the ground and stooped over him to close his eyes—*someday it'll be you, so respect your opponents*, one of his earliest teachers had told him—before retrieving Tirotta's half of the Rain ring.

Xanxus' mouth was tight when Squalo rejoined her and the others. Squalo tipped his head to the side, checking in with her, but she shook her head at him. Well, if she didn't want to talk about it, he wouldn't try to make her.

Instead he settled for fitting the two halves of the ring together—they went together so seamlessly that he couldn't see where the join was once they'd sealed together again—and looked at Mammon, who was already stepping forward in anticipation of the call for the Mist battle.

Which was why it was so surprising when the Cervello said, loud and clear, "Now we will have the trial for the Sky ring. Will the candidates for the position of Vongola Decimo please come forward?"

Squalo whipped his head up as all his instincts screamed—this was it, this was where Enrico and Salvatore were going to make their move, though he didn't see how yet. Enrico was the color of paste, his face so damp it shone in the lights strung over their heads, but Salvatore was smirking, not even trying to hide that this was their moment to act.

Xanxus stepped forward, her expression gone calm and still despite the blazing light in her eyes. The people on the other side, the Ninth's geezers and Federico's guardians, stirred and whispered, nothing loud enough to be intelligible from where Squalo was standing, but the sound of it grated on Squalo's nerves. She entered the arena silently and took the center and folded her arms across her chest to wait for her putative brother to join her.

One part of Squalo was devoted wholly and solely to watching her. Another was monitoring Enrico and Salvatore, but the rest of him was watching the Ninth and his people, tracking the fear and sorrow on the old man's face and the hostility showing on the faces of his people, even though they looked askance at how reluctantly Enrico's feet dragged him into the ring.

Squalo smiled in spite of himself at that, because he'd *thought* that all Enrico's aggressiveness had been the posturing of a coward. Now the other Vongola could see it, too, and he hoped they choked on it.

Xanxus smiled, peeling her lips back from her teeth, when Enrico

finally joined her. "Do you know," she said, her tone almost conversational, "I've been looking forward to this?"

"Of course you have, you crazy bitch." Enrico pulled himself up, standing as tall as he could manage, and glared at her, managing to keep his voice from shaking somehow. "You weren't satisfied with just one of us, were you? After this, are you going after Massimo? Make a clean sweep of it?"

"Why would I do that?" Xanxus rested her hands on the grips of her guns, her Flame already beginning to light her eyes. "He's not the one who killed Federico, is he?"

"You want the one who did that, you might as well shoot yourself and put yourself out of our misery," Enrico scoffed. "It would be a mercy for all of us. Rabid dogs shouldn't be let to roam the streets." His lip curled. "Even if that is your native setting."

The Cervello cleared her throat then. "You may begin when you're ready."

They both ignored her. Xanxus' Flames were beginning to crackle around her hands, but she made no move to draw, not yet. "I may be a rabid dog," she said, voice filled with the promise of Wrath to come, "but at least I'm not a fratricide." She paused. "Yet."

Enrico managed a laugh, unsteady and short, even as his own Flame began to gather in his hands. "Are you *still* insisting on that story?" he mocked her. "Do you really expect us to believe that you're innocent? *Really*, when your so-called guardians just *murdered* five decent, honorable men in cold blood? You really are as crazy as I've always thought you were." His smile turned sharper. "I suppose we shouldn't have expected anything else from you. You *are* your mother's daughter, after all."

Squalo found himself growling; Lussuria dropped a hand onto his shoulder and gripped it. "Steady," he said softly. "She has to fight this one herself."

"That doesn't mean I have to like it," Squalo hissed, taut with how badly he wanted to eviscerate Enrico for the things he was saying and then waded in the blood of all the people he could see whose expressions mirrored Enrico's words.

Xanxus' Flame surged higher, crackling around her hands. "I do expect you to believe me," she said, her voice gone icy. "Because I might be

the crazy whore's daughter, but at least I'm not a fucking *liar* like you."

And still she wasn't drawing, wasn't attacking, though every line of her body was trembling with how tense she was.

It seemed to confuse Enrico that she hadn't attacked yet. He looked thrown by her restraint, briefly uncertain. Then he regrouped and laughed, short and caustic. "You even admit what you are, and you think the Vongola would *ever* accept you as the Tenth? Even if you kill me, it'll never stand, you know. Father will never let you hold this Family, and even if he would, the Family would never stand for it." He smiled. "Face it, Xanxus. You're not one of us and you never will be, and you know it."

Xanxus' voice sounded almost remote as she said, "That's all right by me. If *you're* what the Vongola is, I don't want anyone to mistake me for one of you. I have more self-respect than that." Then she smiled, sudden and savage. "But at least I'll know that *you* won't be Tenth, despite all the things you've done to get your hands on the Sky ring. You'll *never* have the Sky ring, because you're even less worthy of it than I am. The only way you'll ever be Tenth is over my dead body."

"If that's how it has to be," Enrico bit out, his voice gone suddenly hard, and finally went for his throwing knives, snapping the first of them, wreathed in a haze of Sky Flame, at her.

Xanxus' smile stretched across her face as she brushed it out of the air, knocking it aside with one negligent swipe of her gun. "It is." She launched herself at Enrico with her Flame blazing around her hands, burning so high that it trailed after her like the tail of a comet. Enrico threw himself out of the way, a line of blazing knives leaving his hands as he rolled across the ground and back to his feet. Xanxus eluded them with a fluid twist of her body and fired a scorching blast of Flame that seared past Enrico and dug a trench in the earth to his left.

Squalo frowned at that—there was no way she should have missed that shot, unless she'd chosen to, so what was she doing?

Enrico twisted away from the path her Flame had taken and used the cover of that movement to sling another knife at her which came screaming in low and fast. Xanxus swept her hand around, Flame crackling around it, and knocked the knife aside as she sprang forward, firing again. This blast went just a bit wide as well, missing Enrico's head by the barest of margins.

He laughed, short. "What's the matter, Xanxus? Are you out of practice? Didn't the Vendicare let you train while you were in their keeping?" His smile went ugly. "Or did they find something else for you to do instead?"

"How about you visit the Vendicare and see for yourself?" Xanxus snarled as she knocked the next two knives out of her way.

Enrico smiled. "How do you know I didn't?"

The sound Xanxus made, a snarl of pure fury, cut through Squalo. He'd taken a step forward before he'd even realized it; it was only Lussuria's fingers digging into his shoulder that kept him from diving into that arena to help the boss silence that slimy little toad forever. Sera stepped forward too, coming around his side and taking his other shoulder. "Let her have him," she said, low. "Some things a girl has to do for herself."

Squalo growled and clenched his fists, enraged by how helpless he was to stop Enrico from saying those things, from smirking at Xanxus as she snarled and fired on him again and again. The only comfort he had was that Enrico had to scramble to avoid those shots, which wiped some of the sneer from his face.

"Did I touch a nerve?" he asked, panting, and drew another knife that he held low before him, building his Flame between around it in a way that didn't make any sense. "Seems like maybe I did."

Xanxus snarled again, wordless, but Squalo could see the moment when she hauled herself up short, restraining her temper again. "That's what you like, isn't it?" she spat, her mouth twisting around the words. "Finding the things you can say that slide the knife in. You're too much of a coward to attack someone openly, so you cut them to death with your words instead."

"*I'm* a coward?" Enrico asked, still building up that Flame around his knife—what was he going to do, try to match the boss on sheer strength by betting everything on one shot? Surely he had to know better than that. "You're the one who can't stand to listen."

She thrust her guns back into their holsters and raised her hands. "All the things you say are poison!" Her Flame was building around her hands, like she'd decided to do things the old-fashioned, hands-on way. "I'm—"

Enrico interrupted her. "Let me show you how *I've* trained while you

were away," he said, and flung the knife, Sky swirling around it.

Xanxus raised her hands, blasting her own Flame back at him, the wave of it nearly incandescent. Squalo held his breath, seeing the relative strength in that wall of Flame, so much more powerful than the pitiful little blast that Enrico had wrapped around his knife. Surely it would meet Enrico's Flame and absorb it, then envelop Enrico and sweep him right off the face of the earth.

But it didn't.

Enrico's knife punched through Xanxus' Flame, snuffing it out like a candle, and struck Xanxus herself. The knife glanced off her shoulder, but the Flame coalesced around her as her expression changed from one of fury to shock, and hardened all at once with a chiming, crystalline sound.

The only sound in the moment after that was Enrico's harsh breathing as he lowered his hands and satisfaction spread across his face like an oil slick.

Squalo felt as frozen as Xanxus, struck still with the shock of that impossible ice, which wasn't supposed to happen, wasn't like any kind of attack he'd ever seen, and this couldn't be happening, couldn't be *real*—"No," he breathed, barely conscious of breaking away from Sera and Lussuria's restraining hands. "No, *no*, fucking *no*—" There was steel in his hands, because he wasn't going to let them do this, he wasn't going to let them just *kill* her and walk away from it, not this time, not while he had breath left in his body.

The Cervello stepped forward. "The winner of the Sky battle—" she began.

Squalo could barely hear her over the roaring in his ears, but he stopped as short as she did when a sound like the crack of a gun interrupted her. She paused, startled, and looked at the pillar of ice encasing Xanxus' body.

There was a crack in it, over Xanxus' hands.

Enrico went white. "Finish it!" he all but shrieked. "Finish what you were saying!"

Another cracking sound cut across his words as another fracture appeared in the ice, this time over Xanxus' brow, as the one over her hands turned deeper.

The Cervello hesitated, her mouth hanging open, as Enrico nearly danced in place on the turf in his haste and fury. "The battle—"

The sound that followed was the furious sound of a thousand pieces of ice shattering all at once as the ice that had held Xanxus flew apart, the shards of it sublimating into a haze that shrouded her body from immediate view. Someone, he didn't even know who, swore as it did, startled and amazed, and Squalo only realized he was holding his breath when that haze dissipated in the little swirl of a breeze and revealed Xanxus standing at the heart of it, her shoulders heaving and her face blank with shock.

The Cervello shut her mouth and stepped back out of the ring.

Enrico howled. "What does it take to fucking *stop you*?" He fumbled for his belt of knives and flung two at her, one after another, not even bothering with his Flame. "What kind of monster are you?!"

Xanxus was slow to move, her expression still dazed, and one of those knives sank into the flesh of her arm. "What," she said, her voice thick. "That was—"

Enrico didn't seem to have heard her. "What does it take?" he demanded again as he flung another knife at her. This one sliced across her thigh. "Why won't you just disappear already?"

Xanxus shook her head, something in that penetrating her confusion. "Not while I still have a job to do," she said, her voice still slow. She reached up, pulled the knife out of her shoulder, and used it to knock the next one away from her as she began to advance on him.

"A job to do?" He groped for the next knife. "What *job*? All you've done is shame the Vongola since the day Father plucked you out of the gutter!"

"A job." Her voice was stronger; the first haze of Flame was starting to show around her hands again. "I have a job and I'm going to see it done. And you're standing in my way."

She launched herself at him then, all her usual grace stolen away by whatever that ice had been, and she ignored the knife that Enrico sliced across her shoulder when she seized on him. He twisted in her grip, struggling against the hands she'd closed on his shoulders until she snarled at him, no words in it. She threw him down hard enough that he bounced a little and the breath whooshed out of him. Xanxus dropped herself on him then, landing on top of him and pinning him

with a knee against his chest.

The Ninth's Storm, Piero Gemello, had trained all of his children and done it well—Enrico still went for one of his knives despite her weight on his chest. Xanxus snarled at him again as she grabbed his wrist and banged it against the ground until something cracked in it and the knife fell from his fingers. Enrico howled at the injury and she released his wrist to smash a fist into his jaw instead—and again, and again, until his howls had changed into gurgling sobs and he was flailing at her shoulders, trying to stop her.

Xanxus closed her hand on his collar, fisting the cloth in her grip and hauling him up as she stood. She held his bloodied face to hers. "Why did you do it?" she demanded, shaking him like a terrier might shake a rat. "He was better than the rest of us put together!" She shook him again. "Tell me why you did it!"

Maybe Enrico had forgotten that there were witnesses, or maybe he hoped that telling her would save his sorry life. Or maybe he was beyond the point of caring. "Because it should have been me!" he gasped, blood flying with every word. "I was the oldest and I deserved to be Tenth, but everyone treated *him* like the second coming of Giotto! It should have been me!" Rage colored every word in spite of the beating he'd taken. "He didn't deserve it, he would have made the Vongola even weaker—he was happy to let mongrel bastards like *you* into the Family, and God only knows what he would have done once Father died!"

There was shock spreading in the other spectator area, the geezers and Federico's people all in a flutter as Enrico confirmed what Squalo and Xanxus had told them from the start. Squalo kept half an eye on them, storing up the looks on their faces to tell the boss about later, and one eye on Salvatore—who should have looked more distraught that his and Enrico's plots had started unraveling. But he was *smiling*, which put a cold feeling at the pit of Squalo's stomach.

He gestured at the rest of them and saw Lussuria nod. Xanxus' people spread out under Lussuria's hand signals, fanning out and poising themselves to make a grab for Salvatore if he decided to make a run for it.

In the arena, Xanxus was staring at Enrico, some strong emotion twisting her face. "That?" she said. "You killed my brother for *that*?"

Enrico's smile was vicious in spite of the blood gleaming on his teeth.

"I did, and he thought it was you—he died on his knees, thinking the mongrel bitch he loved so much was the one who'd pulled the trigger."

Squalo saw Xanxus suck in a breath, her shoulders heaving with it, and her hands ignited. Her Flame blazed so high that it left black spots dancing across his vision as she raised her free hand and closed it on Enrico's face; when she unleashed that Flame, there was a wet, cracking thud. Enrico's body jerked once and went limp; Xanxus tossed it aside and turned from it, not even bothering to retrieve his half of the Sky ring. Her Flame was still blazing and there was death in her eyes.

There was an almighty ruckus in the stands, geezers shouting and the old man white in the center of them, but Xanxus ignored all that as she stalked forward, making a straight line for Salvatore. He held up his hands, spreading them wide, and said, "Now wait just a moment, here—"

"You helped him kill my brother." Xanxus' voice was as empty and cold as an arctic ice field. She drew a gun and raised it; the shot that roared out of it when she pulled trigger was full of Sky and Wrath and hit Salvatore like a sledgehammer. Salvatore's body flew backwards, its chest a smoking ruin, and skidded across the grass, and that was it, they were done—

Something rose out of Salvatore's body like a miasma, dark and vaguely human-shaped. It resolved into something like a human's figure as people—Varia and geezer alike—cursed and crossed themselves. Squalo didn't recognize the face of the figure it took, which wasn't a thing like Salvatore's, but from the sounds of it, some of the geezers did.

The spirit or ghost or whatever it was laughed, the sound of it as insubstantial as the translucent epaulets on its—his?—shoulders or the long sweep of its hair. "You really didn't need to go that far," he said, almost like he was *chiding* Xanxus. "Poor Matteo wasn't really responsible. You might have spared him."

Cavilo went for her holdout gun and fired on the shade; the bullets passed through it with no effect. Xanxus, meanwhile, stared at the ghost and demanded, "What the fuck are you?"

It was one of the geezers who supplied the answer, Staffieri, the old man's Mist. "Daemon Spade," he said, with a little gesture to ward off evil. "Giotto's own Mist."

So it was a ghost, then, who bowed to them all with a flourish, the gesture mocking. "I see my legacy lives on," he noted, though the name didn't ring any bells for Squalo. "But now that my work here is done, I'm afraid I must be going." Even as he spoke, he was beginning to fade, dissolving at the edges.

"*What* work?" Xanxus ground out. Her Flame glowed around her hands as she dropped her gun back into her holster. "What work are you talking about?"

Spade smirked. "The same work I've always done, of course. Serving the Vongola and keeping it strong." He smiled, the curl of it sharp as a knife. "And you will be strong, stronger than any of your brothers dreamed of being. Strong enough to hold this Family the way it was meant to be."

The sound Xanxus made at that made people step back, even the ones who were nowhere near her. "You son of a bitch." Her Flame blazed out from her hands, slamming down on him, probably more out of her fury than any expectation that it would be more effective than Cavilo's bullets had been.

Spade twisted himself away from the Flames nonetheless, only to stop short when chains lanced up from the ground and wrapped themselves around his wrists and ankles. His surprise could have been comical. "What—?" Then Xanxus Flame slammed into him and seized him, and he writhed against them. "You dare?!"

"This world has no place in it for ghosts." Mammon's voice was quiet; there was a pacifier lying against his chest, glowing indigo. He gestured as Spade struggled against the chains—Mist chains, of course, because anything a Mist user could imagine could be real, provided their will was strong enough to back it. Why *not* chains to hold a ghost? "Go ahead, Boss. Hit him again."

Xanxus snarled and lashed at Spade again, Flame blasting out of her hands. He howled in protest. "Stop this! You should be grateful, you stupid woman! Think of the things I've made possible for you! Think of the place you've claimed!"

"You killed my brother!" she roared in reply, bringing both hands together and building an inferno between them. "I don't want the things you've done for me, I want my brother back!"

"You don't—" the ghost twisting in Mammon's chains began, but Xanxus didn't give him the time to say anything else. She lashed that

furious bolt of Flame at him and held it on him as he screamed at the heart of it, feeding it on Wrath and Sky until even the shadow of Spade's ghost had been burned away. Only then did she drop her Flame, breathing hard and swaying on her feet.

Squalo moved without thinking, was at her side before he'd even realized that he'd decided to be there. "Boss," he said softly into the shocked silence after that, as people began to stir and look at each other, stunned expressions asking *Did that just happen?*

Xanxus didn't seem to hear him. She was staring at the place Spade, whatever he had been, had disappeared from, and Squalo didn't know what the blank expression on her face meant.

Before he could figure out what he should say, the Cervello's spokeswoman said, completely unnecessarily, "The Mist battle cannot be held and the trial of the rings must be concluded. We pronounce the winner to be Xanxus of the Vongola."

That shook people out of their stupors, all right. Xanxus' shoulders went stiff and she turned to look first at the Cervello and then beyond them, to the people who'd stood behind Enrico and watched the trials unfold. None of them, not Federico's guardians or the Ninth's guardians or the Ninth himself, standing at the heart of his people and being supported by Staffieri and Martelli, seemed to know what to say or do next. The old man's face was bleached of color; he looked terrible, wracked by grief and horror, and stared back silently.

The Cervello, apparently satisfied that they'd discharged their duty, turned as one and slipped away. From the corner of his eye, Squalo saw Lussuria flashing more hand signals at the others. They formed up around Xanxus, settling in at her flanks and back as she and her putative father stared at each other.

She was the one who broke their deadlock. "If you send the Vendicare or anyone else after me now that I actually *have* killed one of your sons," she rasped, "I tell you right now that they will *not* take me alive. And I won't sell my life cheap, either."

The Ninth opened his mouth, but for once, he didn't seem to have anything to say. Squalo wasn't sure that there *was* anything he could say now, or ever. That just left it up to someone else to step in now that Xanxus had gone quiet again.

He touched Xanxus' shoulder. "Come on, Boss," he said. "Let's go home."

Xanxus glanced at him, nodded, and the eight of them turned as one unit.

No one tried to stop them as they walked away.

Chapter 6

There was always a letdown after a mission, the slump that came in the aftermath of adrenaline coursing through the blood and the rush of battle. Everyone dealt with it differently, but for once, the others stayed quiet for the duration of the trip home. Lussuria and Sera kept their dark jokes to themselves and Cavilo didn't say anything at all and even Mammon kept his mouth shut on what he'd had to do when Squalo had really half-expected to hear him complain about revealing the extent of his strength as the Mist Arcobaleno.

Xanxus was absolutely silent, gone somewhere inside her head; when they hit headquarters, Squalo had to dismiss the rest of them hastily and stretch his legs to keep up with her as she made for her quarters. She let herself into them and began stripping out of her clothes before Squalo had even managed to get the door decently shut after them.

"Boss," he said as she peeled out of her leathers, which stuck to her skin in the places where Enrico had cut her. "Xanxus. Don't you think you should get those looked at?" Though he wasn't sure she was actually in any mood to deal with Bastone's sniping.

"I don't care." There was nothing in her tone, no triumph or sadness or rage, like all the emotion had burned out of her once Spade had disappeared.

Squalo sucked in a breath and closed his hands into fists at his side. "I care, Boss," he said. "Let me..." No, not call someone, not right now. "Let me patch you up, okay?"

She was turned away from him, her head lowered, so all he saw was the way her shoulders rose and fell, as on a sigh. "Fine. If that's what you want."

It was, or was a start, so he went for the first aid kit stowed in her bathroom and came back with it. She'd taken a seat on the edge of the bed while he was gone and her expression was still unreadable.

Squalo didn't say anything, didn't know what he *could* say, so he knelt at her feet and started with the slice across her thigh, swabbing it out with antiseptic. It was shallow enough that it wasn't going to need stitches, so once it was clean he painted it with the liquid bandage to seal it and moved on to the slices across her shoulder, which were also shallow and easily dealt with. It was the stab wound on her arm that

worried him with how deep it was. He grimaced at it as he cleaned it out, listening to the little hitches of her breath that were the only sign that she was feeling anything he was doing.

At least she wasn't so far gone that she wasn't feeling pain. Small consolation, that.

"Think this is going to need stitches," he said, finally.

She grunted, which he took as permission to get on with it. Squalo sighed and reached for the suture kit—Bastone didn't like it when they overstepped themselves, as she put it, but all of them could do basic field medicine, and he'd had more practice than most at sewing up blade wounds.

He still winced every time he sank the needle into Xanxus' flesh and pulled another suture through it, because it was one thing to sew himself up and another altogether to do it to her. She held herself still through it, until Squalo tied off the last one and clipped the ends short.

There were other things he could see now that he was looking, raw places like burns. "What...?" he asked, skirting his fingers across one that ran across her shoulder. Had it been—"The ice did this?"

"The zero point." Xanxus' voice was distant. "It's the First's technique. Only the boss and his heir learn it. He must have taught Enrico... after. It's only really good for fighting another Sky."

Squalo's throat felt tight with something. Anger, maybe. "Looks like it wasn't much good against you." The raw places looked like burns, and if there was one thing Xanxus' first aid kit was stocked well in, it was burn ointment.

She stopped him when he reached for it, laying his fingers against his wrist. When he glanced at her, all she said was "Shower."

Squalo nodded; that made sense. There were still dark circles of blood in the crescents under her nails and a spatter of blood drying on her face, and they'd both worked up a sweat during the trials. "Sure, Boss."

Something like a shudder rocked her. "Not tonight," she said, which didn't make any sense until she went on. "Just—not *Boss*. Not tonight."

Squalo nodded, accepting that. "Sure," he said, softening his voice. "Xanxus."

Something, relief maybe, eased the look in her eyes. She pushed herself up and paused. "Come with me." It was less a command than a request.

"Always," Squalo promised her, and stripped himself out of his uniform as he followed her into the bathroom, which was as luxuriously fitted out as only befit the leader of the Varia and had a shower that was plenty big enough for two bodies. Had good water pressure, too, though Xanxus hissed when she stepped beneath the spray and immediately adjusted the temperature to something lukewarm. Then she turned her face into it, eyes closed, and let the water stream over her face and slick the hair back from it. The water sluiced over them both, carrying away the worst of the sweat and blood with it. When she just stood there, not moving, Squalo touched her uninjured shoulder with his fingertips. "Want me to get your hair?"

She nodded without opening her eyes, so Squalo undid the catch of her hair dangle—bedraggled now, the feathers dark and limp from the water—and laid it aside as he reached for the shampoo. The fragrance of it, sweet and vaguely floral, was strong enough to cut through the last iron smell of blood, which was probably for the best. Squalo worked it into her hair, massaging his fingers against her scalp, and the only sound between them was the hiss of the spray. Maybe he needed to be talking to her, but he wasn't sure what he needed to say or she needed to hear, and until he figured that out, it wasn't worth risking it. Easier to do this, to rub circles against her scalp and watch some of the stiffness ease out of her body.

There was conditioner to go with the shampoo once he'd rinsed the suds from her hair, and then—Squalo eyed the raw places on her skin and her sponge and just soaped his hands instead of risking abrading those places any more than he had to. She still sucked in her breath every time his palms passed over one of those burns despite how careful he was. Squalo grimaced every time she did and was glad to be finished—probably the only time he'd ever *not* wanted to touch every centimeter of her for as long as possible.

Xanxus didn't move to step out of the spray, not even after the last suds had swirled down the drain, so he reached for the shampoo again and scrubbed the last of the fight off himself, and then—

Xanxus turned and leaned against him, still silent, and pressed her face against his shoulder. Squalo drew a breath and wrapped his arms around her and held her until the water went cold and she'd begun to

shiver.

She was still shivering when they'd gotten dried off and he'd spread ointment across the burns—which patterned her arms and torso and even climbed the side of her face—and she'd slid herself under the blankets. Squalo settled under them with her, wrapping himself and the blankets around her and pressing himself as close to her as he could manage. He whispered her name against her hair.

Xanxus closed her hand on his arm and held onto him, digging her fingers into the muscle of his shoulder hard enough that Squalo knew there would be bruises there when he looked in the morning, a pattern shaped like her fingers. "I'm here," he said, whispering it into the dim light that came from the lamp burning in the next room, the one that always stayed lit these days. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Don't," she said, barely more than a breath against his skin. "Stay."

"Always, Xanxus," he promised her, and felt her shivers finally begin to ease.

It was close to a week before they heard anything out of the main house—anything official. Calla's squad had started the day after the ring trials like any other day and brought reports in detailing the uproar at the main house: the Ninth hadn't exactly collapsed in the wake of losing yet another son or at finding out that Enrico had been the one who'd been responsible for Federico's death, but it had hit him hard nonetheless. Or so sixth squad said. Too, there was the fact that Spade had apparently clouded a whole bunch of peoples' heads to make that scheme work, which meant that a lot of the Vongola underbosses and guardians were walking around with Mist hangovers and scrambling to untangle the mess they'd made of things.

When Squalo asked, though, Calla said that it didn't seem like anyone at the house was in contact with the Vendicare or pushing for a punitive response for Enrico's death. They weren't supposed to, of course, at least not according to the protocols that went along with holding a ring trial, but these days Squalo only trusted the geezers and the old man about as far as he could throw them.

Xanxus took the news Calla and sixth squad brought silently, acknowledging the reports briefly and giving no sign of what she thought of any of it. Where the rest of the Varia was inclined to celebrate—their boss had escaped the inescapable prison *and* won the trial of the rings *and* exposed a conspiracy at the heart of the Vongola

—she was withdrawn, as though she wanted to distance herself from the whole affair. She went about the daily tasks of running the Varia and trained in the halls and said very little to anyone, even Squalo, until someone came down from the main house with the message that Enrico Vongola was going to be laid to rest the next day. The man who brought the announcement—not an invitation, nor quite a command—was an underboss Squalo'd never met. He was visibly unnerved to be in the presence of the woman who led the Varia and was responsible for the funeral he was announcing.

Xanxus listened to him stutter out the details of the arrangements with the same motionless expression that was starting to become the new normal, and Squalo committed them to memory: in the afternoon, three o'clock, the private chapel of the Vongola, very small, family only. That was when she stirred and the Ninth's messenger gulped. "Family only?" she repeated, voice soft. The messenger nodded. "Who sent you?"

"The Ninth did, ma'am," he said, beads of sweat standing out on his forehead.

"I see," Xanxus said, and that was all.

The man winced anyway and plunged on. "Will you be attending, ma'am?"

Xanxus gave him a long look one that made him go even paler. "You said it was for family only."

"Yes?" he ventured, looking more baffled than anything else.

That was quite enough of that. Squalo laid a hand on his shoulder. "Thanks for the message." He steered the man toward the door. "We appreciate the information." Omar was standing sentry outside Xanxus' office; he handed the poor idiot off to him. "Help this gentleman find his way out of here."

He shut the door very firmly and looked to the boss, who was staring into space with an expression like she'd just tasted something bitter. "A private funeral, just for the family," she repeated, and her voice twisted on the final word. She seized the heavy glass paperweight holding down a stack of papers and hurled it across the room. It smashed against the wall, exploding into a million pieces of wicked shrapnel. "*Family!*" Color flushed her face, turning the healing burn on her cheek an angry red.

Squalo stepped back from the mess of glass in case she wanted to throw something else against that wall. "I wish I knew what dictionary they were using," he said, keeping a careful eye on her and privately relieved to see her showing some emotion and reaction at last. "I'm sure I've never seen anyone else use *family* the way they do."

Her laugh was harsh. "No. I haven't either." She stood fast enough that her chair rattled back and rebounded off the wall behind her desk and strode around her desk to pace across the floor. "What the fuck?" she demanded, cutting her hands through the air. "What is he thinking now? Invite me to the funeral and pretend that it's all oaky, that none of this happened? What's he planning now?"

"I don't know," Squalo said, watching her clench and unclench fists hazed with Flame. "I really don't." It could be a stab at getting her away from the Varia, out in the open where they'd have a better shot at taking her down, or it could be a half-assed attempt at reconciliation, or it could be the Ninth deluding himself that they were a happy family. "You going to go and find out?"

The low table in front of the couch was home to a vase of cut flowers. Xanxus snatched it up and sent it to oblivion after the paperweight and stared at the mess of glass and flowers and water, her shoulders heaving like she'd just run a race. "No." She stopped and raked her hands through her hair. "Fuck, no." More quietly, she said, "I don't have any place there."

Squalo wasn't sure he could have disputed that if he'd wanted to. "If you say so. Not sure I could fake being sorry he's dead, anyway."

That got him a smile, brief and sharp. "They do say it's gauche to go watch someone you killed be buried."

"Eh, maybe." He shrugged at her. "But could be satisfying, too."

Xanxus' smile faded as she turned away from the mess. "Not really, no." She jerked her chin. "Call someone to get that cleaned up."

Squalo nodded. "Sure thing, Boss," he said as she returned to her desk and got back to work.

In the end they laid Enrico Vongola to rest without Xanxus' presence and a few more days slipped past, uneasy with the tension of waiting to see what was going to happen. Xanxus spent that time on edge, pacing through the halls in moody silence and training as relentlessly

as she had in preparation for the ring trials. Something of her mood communicated itself to the Varia, so when the Ninth, his right hand, and his Rain came down to them a few days after the funeral, they entered a whole building full of alert, edgy assassins.

It was fitting, really: the last time the boss of the Vongola had come to the Varia, rather than the other way around, had been well before any of the present Varia had joined up. The old man deserved the brisk welcome he got from first squad, which held them in the front hall while Lussuria sent a runner to find the boss and see what she wanted done with them.

Xanxus was in the training hall when Gustav found her; she'd been methodically tearing a series of practice dummies apart with surgical blasts of Flame while Squalo ran through kata and kept an eye on her. Her expression didn't waver as Gustav delivered the message from Lussuria, but the final dummy exploded when she drove a blast of Flame at it that was neither surgical nor precise. "Take them to the client room," she said, voice perfectly even. "I'll see them there once I've cleaned up."

Oh, that was subtle. Squalo couldn't help being delighted with it as he racked his sword and followed her out. Treating the Ninth himself like one of their ordinary clients *and* making him wait on her convenience? That was a good one, made all the better because no one could say that it *wasn't* appropriate for the Varia's boss to greet the head of the Vongola in proper attire rather than sweaty disarray. No one could say that Xanxus wasn't trying.

"What do you think he wants?" Xanxus asked when they were safely alone and had scrubbed themselves clean.

Wasn't that just the question?

Squalo considered it as he wrung water out of his hair, watching her set expression from the corner of his eye. "Don't really know," he confessed. "But he came here and he only has Staffieri and Martelli with him, so he's probably not here to fight." Not the physical kind of fight, which was maybe not as good a thing as it seemed—they were far better equipped for a physical fight. The other kind... well, that was why Xanxus had him. If that was where the Ninth wanted to take it, well, Squalo had all sorts of choice things he'd been saving up to say to that shitty old man. "Why do you think he's here?" Sometimes direct questions could get her to talk a little more, even if it felt strange and presumptuous to be trying to draw her out that way.

She just shook her head and went to dig through the closet for clothes. "I don't know what he wants. Not any more." She tossed a shirt and slacks at him. "Maybe I never did."

Squalo sighed. "Or maybe he just never knew how to deal with you."

"That, too." Xanxus stared into the closet, her eyes gone distant again. Then she shook herself and reached for a blouse. "Only one way to find out, I guess."

They finished dressing in silence; Squalo didn't say anything when she settled her guns on her hips, something she didn't normally bother with for meetings with the old man. He just reached for a blade of his own to wear instead.

When they got down to the parlor that served for dealing with clients, they saw that the Ninth had taken one of the wing chairs arranged around the low table. It should have lent him an imposing air but didn't; he looked frail, old and worn and sad, like all his years had finally caught up with him. He sat quietly, balancing a cup and saucer on his knee, and Staffieri and Martelli stood close at hand. They didn't look tired so much as worried—very worried—and maybe a touch embarrassed.

Xanxus stood in the doorway and looked at them for a moment before she claimed the other chair, the one standing opposite the Ninth's. She rested her palms on the arms, back very straight, and Squalo wondered whether the other three would know her well enough to see the uncertainty in her posture.

She gazed across the low table at the old man and finally said, "What is it?"

The Ninth's voice was quiet; it almost seemed like he couldn't quite bring himself to look at Xanxus directly, at least not for long. "Now that I am here, I find that I don't know how to begin." His gaze slid aside from hers and he gestured. "We brought something that you—left the other night. Gianni."

Staffieri reached into his jacket and Squalo was sure that none of the geezers missed the way that made his back go stiff or his hand drop to his sword. The Ninth practically flinched, God alone knew why, but all Staffieri produced was a flat little box, one that was very familiar. He handed it across the table to Squalo, who flipped the catch to check—yes, that was the other half of the Sky ring and the other half of the Mist ring that were nestled against the black velvet lining of the

box.

Squalo looked at them and then the old man, mind racing, trying to unravel what they meant by this gesture. Was it an acknowledgment that what the Cervello had decreed was official? He stared at them hard but couldn't make anything of the Ninth's tired eyes or the close way Martelli and Staffieri watched him. After a moment, Squalo said, "It's the rings, Boss."

"I don't want them." Xanxus enunciated each word distinctly, never taking her eyes off the Ninth's. She made no move to take the box. "You can have them back. You can have them *all* back." She reached up and twisted her fingers in the chain around her throat, yanking on it until the catch popped, the ends slithered free, and her half of the Sky ring dangled from her fist. "I don't want anything to do with it."

Now he could read the geezers' faces: that was shock, three looks of near-identical disbelief, as Squalo twisted the Rain ring off his own finger, took the half-ring from Xanxus, and dropped them both in the little box. When he held it out, Staffieri took it, looking as though he was acting on autopilot. "But..." he said, sounding stunned. "You fought..."

"I had a job and I did it." Xanxus bit each word off. "They killed my—they killed Federico Vongola and I wasn't going to let him go unavenged. I wasn't going to let that lie go unchallenged." She took a breath. "They killed him so I could have the damn things and *I don't want them*. I don't want anything else to do with your shitty Family."

It took everything Squalo had not to show his reaction when she finally said it, laying it out for him and the geezers alike, and if they didn't understand all the things it explained—her silences, her grim expressions, the way she went still sometimes when someone called her *Boss*—he did. He understood perfectly.

He couldn't do anything as overt as drop his hand to her shoulder in front of the geezers—they didn't need to see that kind of vulnerability in her—but he wanted to.

"They're your Family, too," the Ninth said.

"No, they're not." The leather creaked under Xanxus' fingers as she gripped the arms of her chair. "They've never been my Family." A ghost of a smile touched her mouth. "That's one thing I can thank Enrico for. At least I know *why* now."

Pain flickered across the Ninth's face. "The things Enrico said—"

"Are true. Or everyone thinks they're true." Xanxus' voice went harsh. "He might have been the only one who ever *said* them to me, but he sure as fuck wasn't the only one who believed them. Or why else do you think everyone was so willing and ready to believe *I* did it?" The leather under her fingers groaned uneasily. "If everyone hadn't already thought of me as the crazy whore's slut of a daughter, if they hadn't already wanted a reason to get rid of an embarrassment to the Family—do you think it could have worked as well as it did?" She laughed, the sound ugly as the sentiments she repeated. "Do you really think there aren't already people saying that I really just orchestrated the whole thing, set Enrico up to take the fall, all so I could have the Family right where I want it?"

"There was an eye-witness," Staffieri protested, gesturing to ward off the words, as if that could keep them from hurting his boss, could keep them from being true. "Fedeles saw the whole thing. What were we *supposed* to think?"

"You were supposed to *think*," Squalo said before he could stop himself. "You were supposed to use the brains God gave you and think about how neatly it all fit together and *listen* when people told you there was something wrong—or what else do you pay Sawada for? At the *very* least you could have stopped and not made snap decisions while you let that shitty ghost of a Mist user manipulate you all."

That one hit home with Staffieri, anyway, who was supposed to be a pretty decent Mist in his own right. The Ninth flinched again, though he kept his eyes on Xanxus. "It's not true," he said, practically pleading with her. "That's not—no one really thinks those things are true, Xanxus. You're Vongola, no matter what ugly things Enrico said—"

"Timoteo," Martelli said, stopping him. His eyes were resting on Xanxus, too, dark in a face whose lean, weathered features were unmistakably dark and *other*. Squalo thought there might have been empathy in the way he looked at her. "If she says she's known these things to be true, I'd listen to her. The Family isn't always kind to the ones who are different."

Be damned. One of the geezers actually had a brain.

The Ninth looked up at him, away from the expression on Xanxus' face, turning disbelieving eyes on his Rain. "She's my daughter," he protested. "You're my Rain. We're all Vongola—that's *why* we're

Vongola." He moved restlessly; the cup rattled against the saucer on his knee. "If that's *not* how we're treating one another, why didn't someone *say* something to me?"

"Would you have believed it?" Xanxus sounded more tired than anything else. "Or would you do what you're doing *right now* and find a reason, any reason, not to believe what you were hearing?" She shook her head, grimacing. "What else did you want? I don't want your shitty rings, so let's get on with it."

"That's the reason we're here, though," Martelli said after a strained moment. "Xanxus. You won the trial for the rings. You *are* our heir now. Massimo has made it strenuously clear that he has no ambition to challenge you for that position, and..."

When he trailed off into silence, Staffieri picked up the thread. "We need you." His voice was very even. "The Family is in disarray at the moment, which means that our enemies are already moving to take advantage of the moment. They look at us—our strongest heir dead, another heir killed fighting his sister, and the fourth one manifestly unsuited for the job, and they smell blood in the water."

Xanxus looked at Martelli and Staffieri, then at the Ninth, all of them sober, and laughed, nearly soundlessly. "You need me," she repeated, her voice rough. "*You need me.*"

"I fail to see what's funny in that," Staffieri said, stiffly.

Xanxus' shoulders continued to shake with that soundless laughter. Soundless something. "You wouldn't, would you?"

To hell with appearances. Squalo set his hand on her shoulder, gripping it, hoping that she'd remember that she wasn't alone in this. "I'll tell you what *I* think is funny," he said, feeling the tremors shaking Xanxus beneath his palm. "You three have come here to hand off those rings and tell us how the Vongola needs an heir and you haven't even breathed a *word* of apology yet. I call that funny. Don't you?"

That just set Xanxus off again. "Apologies?" Her laughter was audible this time, ragged and hovering too close to turning into something else. "Apologies mean owning up to being *wrong*. Do you really think you're going to see the fucking Vongola Ninth admit that he might have been *wrong* about something?"

There was that, of course. Squalo squeezed her shoulder, not sure he dared more than that.

Then, to his surprise, the Ninth bowed his head and said, quietly, "I *am* sorry." He set the cup and saucer aside and twisted his hands together until the knuckles stood out white under his skin. "I—thought I was doing what was best. I swear that I only ever acted for what I thought was the best, for you and my—our—Family. If—when—I was wrong, I meant no harm by it. That I have harmed you—I regret that more than I know how to say. I'm sorry, Xanxus. And I have no right to ask more of you, no right at all, but I have no alternative. We need you to take the role that you've claimed. Please, my girl... please, there must be parts of the Family that you would not like to see destroyed." He looked up again, and his eyes were wet. "Federico wouldn't want—"

"Don't." Xanxus nearly snarled the word. "Don't you *dare*. Don't you dare bring him into this. Bad enough they killed him because they wanted me to take his place without you or anyone else trying to tell me what he would have wanted. He's *dead*, he's *gone*, and he's not—he's gone."

The Ninth gazed at her for a moment and nodded. "I'm sorry. It will not happen again."

"It had better not." Xanxus' voice was hard as her eyes.

Squalo squeezed her shoulder as the Ninth drew a deep breath and passed his hands over his eyes, but when he looked up his eyes were steady again, if a bit red. "I apologize." He cleared his throat. "But the fact... it remains that we need a strong heir. The Family needs someone to protect it. I know you don't have any cause to love the Family right now, or me, but please... you acknowledged the terms of the ring battle. You agreed to them—even if it was only a means to your end, I beg you—don't abandon us now. Please, Xanxus."

"I don't want this," Xanxus said again; her muscles were as hard as rocks under Squalo's fingers. "I don't want this, I don't want your guilt trips—you people gave me to the Vendicare to *rot* and you thought I—you thought that was what I deserved—God damn all of you, I *can't do this*—" She bolted out of her seat, shaking Squalo's hand off her shoulder, and turned away from them, pacing across the floor like a caged animal. "And the worst part is that I don't have any choice in it, no choice at *all*—"

Choice, Squalo thought, recalling a meandering conversation at a sushi counter in a sleepy Japanese town. "Sawada," he said out loud, interrupting her. She turned and looked at him, and the geezers made

startled sounds. Maybe he wasn't supposed to know that. "Sawada, Boss. He's Vongola, too. From when the First went to Japan and married again." She stared at him, frowning, and he gestured. "He has a son, Boss. A kid who's a legitimate collateral descendent, just like you." Well, not precisely like her, but close enough. "And he's a lot older than Massimo's brats."

Xanxus stared at him, then looked away from him, at the geezers. "So," she said, voice soft, chilly. "It's *not* just me."

"Tsunayoshi is still very young," the Ninth said before pausing, delicately. "He may not be boss material at all. It's too soon to be sure, and in the meantime, that leaves us without an heir. I'm old, my girl. Old and tired."

Xanxus brushed that aside, impatient with his temporizing. "But there's someone else," she said. "Someone else who can do this."

The look the Ninth gave her was a long one. "Eventually, perhaps. He *might* be able to do it."

Something kindled in Xanxus' eyes. "He will," she said. "If I have to kick his ass into doing it myself. He will." She nodded, sharp. "All right. I'll hold this fucking Family together until he can take it, but after that—I'm done. Do you understand me?"

The Ninth's shoulders slumped a bit. "I've already promised Iemitsu that the mafia world will not touch his son until he's older. We agreed that the boy deserves a proper childhood. He is not to hear of the Vongola until he is thirteen." He paused. "That's five years from now."

Xanxus' mouth tightened. "Then don't you fucking die on me before then, old man. I don't want to be left holding the bag on this."

Both Martelli and Staffieri looked like they wanted to say something about that, but the Ninth held up his hand, silencing them both. "I shall do my best," he said quietly, something going resigned in his eyes. "But are we agreed, then—you will do this for the Family?"

Xanxus straightened her shoulders. "I guess I will," she said, after a moment.

The Ninth exhaled. "Thank you," he said, voice soft. "Thank you, my girl. This is more of a relief that I know how to say."

Staffieri extended the box of rings to Squalo, who took them again,

reluctantly. "We'll need you at the house for meetings and so the Family can see you," he said. "You and your right hand. And your other guardians, though they will need to be present less frequently. We've already let time get away from us, so—"

"Tomorrow we'll start fresh," Martelli cut in, smoothly enough. His smile was a touch sardonic. "As fresh as we can manage, at least."

Xanxus' mouth was flat, but she gave them a curt nod. "Fine. Tomorrow."

The geezers watched her, maybe expecting something else. Then the Ninth sighed and levered himself to his feet. "Tomorrow," he said quietly. "Until then." He turned toward the door, moving at a slow pace, and Staffieri and Martelli fell in to hover over him like a pair of worried nursemaids.

When the door closed after them, Xanxus cursed softly, low and angry, and spun away to the sideboard. She poured a finger of scotch into one of the tumblers and tossed it back. "Fuck!" she said when she'd done that. "Fucking old man."

Squalo looked at the tense line of her back and bit his lip. "I'm sorry, Boss," he said. "I should have found some other way to get you out of there." Some way that hadn't entailed getting tangled up with Sawada's agenda and the fucking rings.

Xanxus looked at him, mouth tight, and then shook her head. "Can't be helped now. At least I'm out." She looked away, raking her hair back from her face, gone silent. She bit her lip and didn't look at him as she asked, "Do you think he meant it?"

That covered a lot of ground. Squalo hesitated and finally asked, "Which part?"

"He said—he was sorry." Xanxus studied something on the sideboard, expression intent on it. "Do you think he meant it?"

Squalo thought it over. "As much as he ever means anything, I guess," he said. "He regretted something, anyway." Maybe just the fact that he'd fucked up enough to have to apologize, for all Squalo knew. "Does it matter?"

Xanxus laughed, short and hard. "No. Not really, I guess. I'm stuck with it now." She went silent for a moment. "I must be crazy."

"Not really," Squalo said, shrugging when she glanced at him. "Just stuck with a shitty pack of geezers and a nasty long-term job, is all." When her mouth quirked faintly, he added, "Least you've got us to watch your back?"

"Cavilo's only doing it so she'll know when to stick the knife in," Xanxus pointed out, though there was something beginning to ease in the hard line of her mouth.

Squalo spread his hands, shrugging at her helplessly. "Can't have everything, Boss."

That time her laugh was close to the real thing. "Guess not." She gestured at the box of rings. "Put those somewhere safe for now."

Squalo nodded. "I'll round up the other ones, too." He tucked the box under his arm and paused before going to do just that. "You going to be okay, Boss?"

She didn't answer right away; instead she looked away from him, tracing her fingers along the edge of the sideboard. "I'll survive."

That wasn't quite the same thing. Squalo opened his mouth to say as much, then decided against it. "Guess that's a place to start," he said.

"Yeah," Xanxus said, mouth quirked like she knew what he'd been about to say. "I guess it is."

Coda

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Ninth and his people were expecting them first thing, but Xanxus ignored that and turned away from the main pathway up to the house. Squalo followed her, pacing along at her heels as she turned down a little gravel path that went past the gardens and descended into the wooded area behind the house, which was when he understood where she was going.

The Vongola dead slept in their own cemetery tucked away from the main house, shaded by trees that measured their lives in centuries. It was carefully tended by the groundskeepers and the flowers on Enrico's grave had not even begun to wilt yet.

Xanxus ignored his grave, however, stalking past it without a second glance, and came to stand in front of a grave only a little less recently filled. Squalo, not knowing whether she wanted his company or not, hung back on the path, watching her stare down at the earth and the grave marker. She didn't cry, or speak, or anything—just stared at the grave in silence as the minutes slipped past.

When she did speak, it was to say, "Do you know what the worst part is?"

Squalo stepped closer, coming to stand next to her. "No, Boss."

"He died thinking I was angry with him." Xanxus stared down at the grave, eyes dark. "They arranged it so that he would die thinking I was still angry with him."

There wasn't anything Squalo could say to that. Instead he laid his hand against her shoulder, holding it while she communed with Federico's grave and her demons. At length she sighed and straightened her shoulders. "They're waiting for us," she said, turning away. "You coming?"

"Right behind you, Boss," Squalo said, "always."

end

Chapter End Notes

Firestorm has a handful of original characters in various roles.

Cavilo, Sera, and Calla are all expies (TVTropes: [Expy](#) - warning, link goes to TVTropes!) of characters from other sources. Cavilo is lifted wholesale from Lois McMaster Bujold's *The Vor Game*, since she seemed to be more than suited to life as a psychopathic mafia assassin. Sera and Calla are both from anime/manga sources. Sera is better known as *Bleach*'s Yoruichi, while Calla is based off the really rather feral Anthony Himemiya from the movie *Adolescence of Utena*.

Cavilo gets tagged to be Xanxus' Storm in lieu of the canonical Belphegor for a couple of reasons. The first is that, while I'm playing fairly fast and loose with the timeline, Bel is only about 11 at the oldest during this fic. Whereas Sawada Iemitsu may have no qualms about signing up five-year-olds to be guardians, I do. Second, within the world of the fic, Cavilo makes for an interesting contrast to Xanxus, and a source of conflict. Third, there's a real dearth of female characters in KHR and I like to redress that when possible.

Calla replaces the Gola Mosca because, within the universe of Firestorm, it makes no sense to have the Cloud be the Sky-fueled doom machine. That works really well within canon, but the plot arc for fem!Xanxus goes in a different direction--hence the need for a character to stand in for the Gola Mosca, and hence Calla.

And Sera becomes a potential Mist guardian because a.) Yoruichi is just that cool and b.) see above re: lack of awesome female characters. Also, it seems to me that Mammon has his own agenda, especially canon's Varia arc. This seems to be changing as we enter the Arcobaleno arc, but as that's a fairly recent development, I've ignored that here.

The one other expy is the character Harper, who is, of course, *Inception*'s Eames.

Obviously I'm using non-canonical guardians for Timoteo as well. These are the same guardians I've been using for other branches of Choice--generated well before canon gave us names and character designs for the Ninth's generation of guardians--and I have a fairly extensive head-canon built up for them. *shrugs* What can I say? I've grown fond of them, and I have trouble taking a series of guardians named after desserts seriously.

The astute reader may have noticed that Daemon Spade goes down a lot more easily here than in his battle against Tsuna and Enma. My logic for that, such as it is, is that in his battle with Tsuna and Enma, he'd managed to accumulate about ten different types of Flame, plus ten pieces of overpowered, Flame-specific weaponry. In Firestorm, he has not had that luxury and is not as dangerous a final boss as he is for Tsuna Enma.

Well, that's my story, anyway, and I'm sticking to it. ^_~

Works inspired by this one

[Firestorm \[PODFIC\]](#) by [Opalsong](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!